Decentralising narratives in Marja Helander's short film "Birds in the Earth"

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Tiivistelmä – Referat – Abstract

This thesis proposes polyphonic interpretations of the short film *Birds in the Earth* (*Eatnanvuloš Lottit*, 2018) by Sámi artist Marja Helander. The thesis investigates and develops a method to decentralise the research of Sámi art conducted by non-Sámi art historian's perspective. The artwork addresses discourses about the Sámi history, culture and current matters. This raises the question of which kind of interpretation a non-Sámi art historian can form employing traditional art historical methods such as researching literature. The thesis examines how including perspectives of Sámi interviewees influences the comprehension and therefore decentralises interpretations of *Birds in the Earth*.

The base of this thesis lays in the tradition of art historical analysis and interpretation. Additions include writings on decolonisation and Indigenous art by Kerstin Knopf, the term of polyphonic history by Peter Burke and inter/view as exchange of gazes following Alessandro Portelli.

In order to formulate decentralised interpretations, three open-ended interviews with Sámi spectators are conducted about their experience and understanding of the short film. Thoughts and stories articulated by the interviewees are woven into the interpretation which proceeds by the categories of choreography, costumes, props and scenography. With the short film as point of departure, Sámi discourses are discussed such as landownership, tourism and appropriation, togetherness with nature and Sámi identity. Input from the interviews is combined with research insights from literature, seminars and documentaries. Both the interviews and the art historical research are presented alongside each other without competing or excluding each other.

Adding Sámi interviewees' perspectives decreases the distance between a non-Sámi art historian's interpretation and the Sámi artwork which would have formed through merely employing research from literature, seminars and documentaries. The interpretation is enriched and comes alive by the interviewees' elaborated experiences. The decentralised and therefore decentralising narratives come closer to the substance of the artwork as the art historian is formulating while self-reflecting. This implicitly demands the acknowledgement of historical and cultural references of art history itself and a reflected positioning of the non-Sámi art historian's role in relation to Sámi discourses alongside researching and writing. Developing the methodology of non-Sámi art historians writing about Sámi art proofs necessary and purposive due to the growing importance of and interest in Indigenous art.

Avainsanat – Nyckelord – Keywords

Sámi art, Marja Helander, Indigenous art, art history, contemporary art, Indigenous filmmaking, decolonisation

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Table of contents

Cover image: Marja Helander, *Birds in the Earth,* 2018.
Screenshot by author. Courtesy of the artist.

1. Departing introduction

Entering the Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma in autumn 2019, I did not foresee the visit leading me to the topic of my master thesis. That day I came to see *Coexistence*[1], an exhibition with works of the museum's collection on the topics of human, animal and nature. I was curious to explore the artworks as inspiration for my upcoming thesis. As I had just finished my master in arts with an art-based research on embodied simulation in performance art, I was eager to further investigate embodied knowledge and our intuitive understanding of an artwork in my graduate degree of art history – adding an academic thesis to the practical one.[2]

In the *Coexistence* exhibition, artworks with exceptional material or positioning in space first caught my attention: a distressing yet meditative installation portraying the slow fading out of an animal's life in a dark room[3], a shaman-like figure riding a sleigh dragged by two swans, whose shadows on the walls expanded the piece into the space[4] and a mesmerising colourful handicraft sculpture resembling landscapes of the North[5].

My next encounter was a short movie which a friend had recommended to me. At the entrance of the space was an exhibition text describing the work. Already before reading it, I noticed an additional language which I did not recognise. I decided to first watch the short film and leaving the inspection of the background information for later. Walking through a narrow dark corridor, I entered a small black box theatre. The video was exhibited in a loop, so I joined at a random moment of the screening. Turning around a corner, there was a big wall on which the video was being projected. In the rear part of the space, a long-stretched grey couch provided seating for approximately ten people. The surrounding walls were covered with dark thick theatre curtains, probably to absorb both light and sound, making the space more enclosed and intimate. Some spotlights were directed to the couch and the back of the room for orientation.

The screened short film was called *Eatnanvuloš Lottit, Maan sisällä linnut, Birds in the Earth*.[6] The first time I saw it, I was standing behind the couch and maintaining a physical distance. Watching an artwork from afar made me keep a critical stance in my mind. Would the video draw me into its world? Would my bodily presence dissolve in the images projected onto a wall?

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[1] "Coexistence - Museum Of Contemporary Art Kiasma" 2019.
[2] Becher 2019.
[3] Haapoja 2007.
[4] Halonen 2014.
[5] Pieski 2015.
[6] The short film is available in Finland on Yle Areena, see Helander 2018.

The short film showed two ballerinas making their way dancing through Lapland and Helsinki. At some points, the identical looking girls wore colourful traditional costumes. There were several scenes interrupting the mere beauty of the arctic landscapes and ballet movements with absurd events leaving me clueless. Why were these two girls dancing ballet in Lapland? What were they trying to communicate? Why were they dragging stuffed animals through the snow? I was left with abstract questions which I was not sure how to even phrase. Yet, I had felt the sensations of sadness, guilt and sympathy. My eyes had become teary although I could not make sense of the metaphors and symbols this short film was obviously conjuring. I had received an emotional message without contextual background knowledge.

After this first exposure, I visited the museum multiple times to rewatch *Birds in the Earth* in the museum setting. I started to read and research about the short film's artist Marja Helander and her background as a Sámi artist. Broad discourses started to open up to me about the Sámi culture and history. The Sámi are the only Indigenous people of the European Union. Their homeland Sápmi is situated in the North of Europe spreading across the borders of Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia. My initial reaction to the short film had formed without knowing anything about the Sámi. I was curious to explore my own and others' intuitive experience and expand my understanding through research.

As an art historian it is my profession to analyse and interpret art which means giving words to the meaning and experience of artworks. Yet, I was wondering to which extend this is possible through merely reading literature and research, attending seminars and watching documentaries. How much would my interpretation of *Birds in the Earth* differ from the narrative of someone who lives and embodies the context of the culture and history of the short film's content? What kind of added value does it bring to combine my art historian perspective with Sámi spectators' experiences and interpretations?

1.1. Research questions and content

For starting my investigation, these arrays of questions were collected and rephrased into describing a research setting. In an art historical investigation, the "[i]nterpretation begins in articulating our incomprehension […] as a series of questions."[7] Organising and formulating my thoughts into concrete angles leads to the following three research questions:

[7] Bätschmann 2003, 184.

(1) What kind of interpretation can a non-Sámi art historian form about an artwork thematising the Sámi culture, history and current situation through research from literature, seminars and documentaries?

(2) How does including perspectives of Sámi interviewees influence and, therefore, decentralise interpretations of a non-Sámi art historian?

(3) How does interviewing Sámi spectators shape the comprehension and interpretation of *Birds in the Earth*?

These questions are investigated by combining theories on decolonisation through Indigenous art such as Kerstin Knopf's *Decolonizing the Lens of Power: Indigenous Films in North America* and the voices of three Sámi interviewees into the art historical interpretation. The three open-ended interviews were conducted after watching the short film together at the Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma in February 2020. The questions revolved around the Sámi spectators' impressions and understandings of the short film.

In this thesis, the interviewees' thoughts and experiences get in conversation with both the short film and theoretically researched knowledge on the Sámi history and culture. This interaction is carried throughout the aspects of choreography, costume, props and scenography.

One source of literary inspiration and insight is *Vastatuuleen*[8] (in English: 'against the wind', own translation) by Jaana Kanninen and Kukka Ranta in which the Finnish journalists function as spokeswomen for the Sámi in elaborating and reflecting Sámi history, culture and experience to the Finnish population. Similarly, this thesis aims at empowering the narratives of the Sámi through decentralising the narratives of my individual art historian's interpretation.

1.2. About the artist

Reviewing the background of an artist can give insights to what has influenced the artwork at hand. The director of *Birds in the Earth* Marja Helander (born 1965) is known as Sámi photographic, media and video artist. Her artworks often combine environmental, political and Sámi discourses with a humorous undertone. She grew up in urban Helsinki, yet her father's side of the family is Sámi from Utsjoki. After studying painting at the Lahti Institute of Design and Fine Arts, Helander focused on photography. Already during her studies, she was interested in researching her own identity as city-

[8] Ranta and Kanninen 2019.

Sámi through her artworks. There is often a humorous tension between the modern lifestyle in the South of Finland and her Indigenous roots in the North. In her artworks, traditional Sámi culture and myths meet the modern Finnish and the contemporary Sámi lifestyle. Whereas the Sámi commonly are portrayed as reindeer-herding nomads, this image is updated through Helander's work. It raises questions concerning the layers of cultural and personal identity, recurring discussions of the Sámi on landownership and colonialism and issues vital to all of us such as ecology and consumerism. Helander communicates gently from a transcultural, double background perspective. Strong emotional impact is one of her motivations both in her own artworks and in her curatorial work for example at *Mänttä Art Festival*.[9]

Exploring Helander's background and oeuvre more profound discourses can be discovered behind beautiful, humorous and entertaining appearances of her artworks. The traditional Sámi costume *gákti* often hints at narratives which require knowledge about the Sámi history and culture like in Helander's former video works *Dolastallat – To Have a Campfire* (2016)[10], *Trambo* (2014)[11] and *Rovaniemi 50 cent* (2014)[12]. In all three videos, Helander is wearing her *gákti*. In some scenes of *Birds in the Earth*, the dancers are shown in their traditional costumes repeating the kind request aimed at the spectator to educate themselves about the Sámi if wanting to know more.

1.3. Sámi history and culture in Finland

The Sámi homeland called Sápmi is nowadays part of Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia. The Sámi build one Indigenous people consisting of multiple local communities which show diversity in culture and language. The variation of the details in the traditional Sámi costume *gákti* depending on origin and family offers only one example. As Helander is a Sámi with roots in Utsjoki and *Birds in the Earth* is situated in Finland, my focus lays on the Sámi history and culture in the area of Finland.

Arriving in Northern Europe some 10,000 years ago, the Sámi today are the only Indigenous people in Europe and yet, most Fins lack education and solid knowledge on the Sámi. Instead, a romanticising image of nomads wandering with their reindeer is drawn by touristic advertisement and exoticism. Reindeer herding has been only one of the traditional livelihoods of the Sámi. When there were no borders yet, the Fell Sámi adapted to the reindeer's nature by accompanying them on their annual migration. Summer fields in the North were often situated in the areas of peninsulas of the Arctic

[9] "Mänttä Art Festival Curator 2019" 2019.
[10] Helander 2016.
[11] Helander 2014b.
[12] Helander 2014a.

Ocean. Each *siida*, which is a group of families herding and living together, had their own traditional region where they would leave some structures of housing.[13] During the winter the Fell Sámi and their reindeer wandered south for example to Enontekiö. The winter fields provided food for the reindeer such as lichen. Living in and therefore being part of the landscape has established a pragmatic togetherness of the Sámi with their environment which always connects to something concrete like a forest, lake or river, instead of the abstract, timeless term "nature" without a specific location.[14]

When the borders were drawn and redrawn, it meant an unnatural division for all Sámi and Sápmi. With distributed parts in Finland, Norway, Sweden and Russia, the borders have built a political restriction for many traditions. Reindeer herding is the most known example, yet fishing and hunting have old Sámi traditions as well. The number of Sámi taking care of reindeer as their main livelihood is declining. In the documentary *Poromiehen silmin*[15] (in English: 'Through the eyes of a reindeer man', own translation), Sámi reindeer herder Aslak Paltto presents his everyday work of trying to track and identify dead reindeer as well as their predators. It is a recording, which deromanticises reindeer herding without leaving behind sincere care of the animals, their natural surroundings and traditions.

Haven taken reindeer herding as a stereotypical example, it is not the only nor the main challenge of the Sámi after being colonised. There have been multiple attempts to oppress and eliminate the Sámi culture. In addition to forbidding Sámi language in obligatory boarding schools, the Sámi have been discriminated through destructing traditional accessories like the *ládjogahpir*, Sámi headwear, and traditional Sámi drum which were both almost completely wiped out during christianisation. When school became mandatory, many Sámi families lived too far for an everyday commute. Wanting to secure a future for their children, parents often sent them to boarding schools. The language in both schools and accommodation was exclusively Finnish. It was forbidden and often penalised to speak your Sámi mother tongue or wear the *gákti* which created shame and repression of the Sámi children's own language and culture. The result can be seen in how many Sámi with these oppressive experiences have decided or could not teach Sámi language to the following generations.[16]

Yet, this is no victim narrative of the Sámi. After decades of struggle and shame, recent activities for reclaiming lost rights and raising awareness are blossoming. Especially the young generation has started to relearn and revive their lost traditions and languages. Language immersions are being organised, although only loosely funded. Young adults are returning to their ancestors' former

[13] Ranta and Kanninen 2019, 38.
[14] West 2019.
[15] Paltto 2019.
[16] Ranta and Kanninen 2019, 143–171.

hometowns in order to get into contact with their embodied pasts. They are educating themselves on tradition and culture. At the *Sámi Education Institute*[17], for example, Sámi handicrafts are taught. The new Sámi generation is actively creating, searching and fighting for their Sámi cultural identity.

The Sámi have had linguistic and cultural self-governance in their native region as laid down in the Constitution of Finland.[18] As the supreme political body of the Sámi in Finland the Sámi Parliament *Sámediggi* manages this self-government since 1996.[19] Yet, the Finnish government has failed multiple times to consult the *Sámediggi* as agreed upon concerning topics such as fishing rights or building an Arctic railway crossing Sápmi although both issues interfere with the Sámi cultural self-government.[20]

The *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* published in 2007 supports a broad self-determination and self-government on Indigenous land.[21] Establishing a "universal framework for minimum standards for the survival, dignity and well-being of the Indigenous peoples of the world"[22], it also includes articles on the right in land use.[23] Another arrangement protecting Indigenous rights is the ILO-convention 169, the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention. It was approved by the United Nations already in 1989 recalling human, social, cultural, political and other rights for the Indigenous and Tribal peoples.[24] Norway was the first country to confirm the ILO-169. In regards of the Sámi discourse, only Denmark has followed to ratify the convention. In contrast, the state of Finland has already been preparing the ratification for over twenty years. It keeps on being interrupted as the topic of landownership has yet to be agreed upon.[25]

Different to earlier generation's shame of their language and tradition, the current young generation is freer to embrace their origins proudly maintaining their culture including languages and handicrafts. One of the recent accomplishments has been the start of the truth and reconciliation commission concerning the Sámi people in 2017.[26] These kind of commissions have already been

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[17] "Sámi Education Institute," n.d.
[18] "Self-Governance" 2020.
[19] "Sámi Parliament" n.d., "The Sámi in Finland" n.d., Finnish Constitutional Law n.d.
[20] Ranta and Kanninen 2019, 229–239.
[21] Ranta and Kanninen 2019, 234.
[22] "United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples" 2007.
[23] "YK:n julistus alkuperäiskansojen oikeuksista ja alkuperäiskansojen maailmankonferenssina tunnetun YK:n yleiskokouksen korkean tason täysistunnon loppuasiakirja" 2016, 32, 36.
Article 32, 1.: "States shall consult and cooperate in good faith with the indigenous peoples concerned through their own representative institutions in order to obtain their free and informed consent prior to the approval of any project affecting their lands or territories and other resources, particularly in connection with the development, utilization or exploitation of mineral, water or other resources."
[24] "C169 - Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 (No. 169)" 1989.
[25] Ranta and Kanninen 2019, 28, 193–195, 234.
[26] Ranta and Kanninen 2019, 30.

established in approximately 40 countries around the world. In this case, the truth and reconciliation commission is a cooperative process of the Government of Finland, the Sámi Parliament and the Skolt Village Assembly[27]. They aim is to work together in identifying and assessing historical and current discrimination. Subsequently, the state of Finland will bear responsibility for its actions. The aim is to work together on strengthening both the links between the Sámi amongst each other and with the state of Finland as well as the realisation of the rights of the Sámi people in Finland.

An increasing education on the Sámi discourses is noticeable in Finland. In addition to denser connectivity amongst the Sámi themselves, Finnish researchers of different fields have taken an interest in the Sámi discourses. The previously mentioned publication *Vastatuuleen* and this thesis are only two examples. My colleague art historian Emma Lilja writes about works by Sámi artist Outi Pieski and post-colonial eco-criticism. Lilja investigates how the artworks bring together current questions of human rights and environmentalism.[28] Her research was also featured in the Finnish National Gallery's research magazine. Heidi Sinevaara-Niskanen examines the politics of knowledge in the Arctic regions. Her dissertation shows how knowledge on, for and to the Arctic regions is provided with a focus on indigeneity and gender.[29] With my thesis I wish to add to this movement of decentralising knowledge and narratives on the Sámi and Sápmi.

[27] Prime Minister's Office 2019.
[28] Lilja 2020.
[29] Sinevaara-Niskanen 2015.

2. Guiding theoretical framework

2.1. Decentering research

As *Birds in the Earth* is created by a Sámi artist and addresses Sámi culture and history, it already implies and demands a discourse of colonisation[30] and decolonisation. In simple terms, a people gains political independence through decolonisation.[31] Along with the truth and reconciliation commission, artworks as well as research can become steps in the decolonisation process.

On the one hand, Sámi artists themselves can sensitise an audience by addressing Sámi history and contemporary discourses. Helander's artwork *Birds in the Earth* was created with and within Sámi culture and history. I suggest that addressing contemporary Sámi thematics and discussions in the contextual framework of settlers' art supports decolonisation of the Finnish art world. By occupying space in the Finnish art scene *Birds in the Earth* directs the attention of the Finnish audience towards and into the experiences and realities of the Sámi. Art as an entry point into such a complex discussion can show the experiential reality, which might otherwise be overlooked in bureaucratic discourses about laws and ownership. This thesis further investigates how this Indigenous artwork gives the opportunity for processing decolonisation by both artist and spectators.

On the other hand, also writing a thesis about a Sámi artwork shifts attention and offers space to the decolonisation discourse. Yet, the reader needs to be aware of two important facts: The writer of this thesis is not a Sámi and this writing commits to academic structure, guidelines and research context of art history which does not originate from the Sámi culture. For an art historian, research is a tool for critical thinking, analysing and interpreting. It has a long tradition in the settlers' history. For many Indigenous people, the term *research* sounds problematic instead of an objective meaning of "studious inquiry or examination"[32] coming to mind of an art historian. "When mentioned in many Indigenous contexts, it stirs up silence, it conjures up bad memories, it raises a smile that is knowing and distrustful."[33] The continuous exploitative investigation of Indigenous people has lead to a research fatigue also in the case of the Sámi. A common example is having to take part in humiliating case studies without ever getting to know their results.[34] As a reaction, questions arise in Indigenous communities critically demanding self-reflection from the researcher: "Whose research is it? Who owns it? Whose interests does it serve? Who will benefit from it? Who has designed its questions and

[30] "Colonize" n.d.
[31] Procter 1978.
[32] "Research" n.d.
[33] Smith 1999, 1.
[34] Ranta and Kanninen 2019, 117–142.

framed its scope? Who will carry it out? Who will write it up? How will its results be disseminated?“[35] Answering these questions, even only internally, is not a mere external justification. It also strengthens and clarifies research.

Art historical research in particular categorises artworks into streams and groups, names isms and formulates analyses and interpretations of artworks and artists – leaving out the artist's own voice. Art historians use writing for structuring thoughts and giving them a communicative form. The written words are contextualised by texts of peers and science. This academic research is not inherent to Indigenous culture and yet, art historians choose to view Indigenous artworks through the art historical framework. This is also the case in this thesis, yet, other voices are included in order to decentre my knowledge production.

The wish of decolonising art historical methods initiates educating oneself on colonial history and in this case, integrating Sámi history and contemporary discussions into the writing. According to medical anthropologist Nayantara Sheoran Appleton, there has been a trend towards decolonising academia but it has “been co-opted from a vibrant and critical engagement to an academic buzzword“[36]. Using the term *decolonisation* risks flattening the complexity of the topic. In their article “Decolonization is not a metaphor“, researchers Tuck & Yang explain that overusing the term may prevent the opportunity of realising decolonisation. Over-utilisation of the word means inflation of the core meaning and aims as this “recenters whiteness, it resettles theory, it extends innocence to the settler, it entertains a settler future“[37]. Decolonisation is not obliged to sooth the settlers' discomfort and answer settlers' questions. It is an openly developing process and only accountable to Indigenous sovereignty and futurity.[38] Tuck & Yang remind us that decolonising is necessarily unsettling. Wanting to decolonise comes from the uncomfortable weight of reality.[39]

In this text, I choose the term *decentering* to describe the ongoing process of searching for ways to decolonise.[40] By *decentering* instead of *decolonising*, I step back from claiming to identify all the necessary steps of decolonisation. As one of the words proposed by Appleton for progressive academia language, *decentering* acknowledges the art historical researcher's central position as a

[35] Smith 1999, 10.
[36] Appleton 2019.
[37] Tuck and Yang 2012, 3.
[38] Tuck and Yang 2012, 35.
[39] Tuck and Yang 2012, 7, 9.
[40] Appleton 2019.
Appleton reminds us that there are words which might be more suitable and which do not claim to *decolonise*, yet support decolonisation. She proposes words such as diversity, digress, decentre, devalue, disinvest, diminish depending on the context and the intention.

starting point. My approach to *decentering* is combining different perspectives during the knowledge production process by analysing and discussing together with three Sámi interviewees.

2.2. Decolonising through Indigenous filmmaking

In the following, I am referring to Kerstin Knopf's book *Decolonizing the Lens of Power: Indigenous Films in North America*, drawing parallelisms between the North American and Sámi Indigenous empowerment through filmmaking. This provides a historical context for *Birds in the Earth* and Helander's oeuvre. Both take part in a global development of the discourse about Indigenous people. By creating their own content, Indigenous filmmakers move from being objects portrayed by the colonisers to focusing the lens onto their own narratives and perspectives as subjects. Although Knopf's book is written about Native Americans, most is directly applicable to the Sámi.

The colonial gaze has been creating stereotypical and romanticised images of the Indigenous people and culture which constructs and sustains an imaginary and ideological Indigenous character and simultaneously leads to racism, disrespect, marginalisation and economic, political and cultural oppression or more emotionally speaking confusion, self-denial, cultural alienation and identity-crises. Indigenous filmmakers strive for participation and productive control over a realistic representation. After an intense period of Indigenous political activism in the 1970s when documentary films about cultural and social issues and political conflicts were made, Indigenous dramatised filmmaking started in the late 1990s. The medium of film became a vehicle of Indigenous cultural and political expression, "thereby entering the dominant colonial film discourse and creating an answering discourse."[41] Indigenous filmmakers started to take control over their image-making process. This meant ceasing to be studied and described as objects, and instead becoming subjects who create self-controlled images of their culture.

Through creating their own image, Indigenous people are breaking free from the colonial gaze, a *gaze of power*, according to Michel Foucault.[42] The analysing gaze no longer exercises its power through exclusion and degrading the research subject to mere objects. Indigenous filmmaking returns the gaze. In some scenes of *Birds in the Earth*, Helander's protagonists even literally gaze back at the spectator as response to being surveilled and romanticised. Helander reshapes colonialist means of production. Film technology is employed to create self-controlled images that look critically at colonialist images. This is a means of decolonising the lens of power: by quoting, mirroring, throwing

[41] Knopf 2008, xii.
[42] Knopf 2008, xiv. For reading on the "gaze of power", see Foucault 2003.

back at, discussing, and subverting colonialist images. Instead, self-determined images are projected through the same lens, free of stereotyping and objectification. "[T]he most prevalent ideological element of dominant media discourse that Indigenous filmmakers react to is the stereotypical visualization of [them]"[43], to such an extent that this picture becomes more real and accepted to the colonialist than the authentic Sámi. The lens of the Indigenous filmmaker is a second, self-controlled gaze. Through producing own media and images, the Sámi step out of the role of an object and become "subjects that know and present".[44] My thesis looks through several lenses. Some are allocated by the interviewees and some by myself.

Helander's film and oeuvre is connected to the global processes of decolonisation created by anticolonist media: Sámi and Indigenous artists in general are rewriting their own histories, taking control over own images, speaking in their own voices, proposing counter-truths and counter-narratives informed by the anti-colonialist perspective, in a similar manner as other minoritarian filmmakers.[45] Postcolonial film has gone through various stages, also in the Sámi history: anthropological and ethnographical yet degrading "research", stereotypical portraits of a romanticised Sámi image in films such as *Valkoinen peura*[46], starting to control their own image through documentation of *joik* and through humour in the television program *Märät säpikkäät*[47], and continuing with documentaries like *Poromiehen silmin* and short films like *Birds in the Earth*.

Helander's work shows the movement of the past decades "away from social and political realism in documentary form to a dramatized mode in which filmmakers stay true to convential filmmaking but also experiment with style, technique, narrative forms, metaphoric plots, and a humorous subversive play with the dominant media discourse."[48] Nevertheless, historical and contemporary events keep being re-enacted in Indigenous filmmaking. The resulting form is called *docudrama* in which "a clear distinction between documentary and fictional films/videos cannot always be made"[49]. Combining fact and fiction into a form outside Western genres could be seen as result from mixing different world views in everyday life.

Although Indigenous cinematography is still hardly seen on mainstream media, it is growing and becoming its own internationally recognised film tradition.[50] One example is the annual *Skábmagovat*

[43] Knopf 2008, 8–9.
[44] Knopf 2008, 7.
[45] Knopf 2008, 17.
[46] Hänninen 2017 (2016).
[47] Märät säpikkäät: Ihanat naiset Lapista 2013.
[48] Knopf 2008, 60.
[49] Knopf 2008, 63.
[50] Knopf 2008, 61.

– *Indigenous Peoples' Film Festival*[51] taking place under the polar lights in Inari, the center of Sámi culture in Finland. This open event is a significant meeting and relation maintenance space campaigning for and contributing to the Sámi and Indigenous film industry's visibility. As one of the oldest Indigenous film festivals in the world, it is a natural and necessary completion to the film selection in Finland.

Sámi artworks are also slowly arriving in the mainstream industry and national museums of Finland: Works by Helander and Sámi colleague Outi Pieski have been purchased into to collection of the Finnish National Gallery. However, parallel appropriation of the Sámi culture continues and reminds us of the necessity of decentering, decolonising and reconciliation: Tourism shops are selling Sámi drums as exotic souvenirs and artworks are appropriating Sámi costumes as part of Jamaican grind culture.[52]

In the recent years, there has been the most clear critique of colonialism in Finland so far. Often the Nordic countries are not considered in colonialist history. Ulla Vuorela's concept of *colonial complicity* offers the necessary nuance for this post-colonialist time: through colonial complicity Vuorela describes a "situation in which a country has neither been historically situated as one of the colonial centres in Europe, nor has it been an innocent victim of, or stood outside of, the colonial project."[53] This means a process of overtaking imageries, practices and products of the colonised and making them become "part of the 'national' and 'traditional' culture of the Nordic countries."[54] Through Sámi filmmaking and taking over own image-making, self-representation and creating decolonising cultural, historical, and political discourses, seeds for decolonisation have been planted yet it is still far from being in full bloom.[55]

2.3. Analysing Indigenous art

The term *art* in Sámi *dáidda* is of Finnish origin yet close to the Sámi word *dáidu*, which can be translated as skill or knowledge.[56] Crafts, *duodji*, have a long Sámi tradition and are visible in Outi Pieski's hand-woven sculptures and in Helander's film's costumes. In one of the conversation held for this thesis, interviewee A elaborates how Sámi handicrafts and Sámi art are similar: "Sámi art is always practical." The term for art comes from the 1970s, thus is young and was imported from the

[51] "Skábmagovat Film Festival - What" n.d.
[52] Frilander 2016.
[53] Keskinen et al. 2009, 31.
[54] Keskinen et al. 2009, 17.
[55] Knopf 2008, 63.
[56] Lohiniva 1999, 20.

Western art ideal. Therefore, it might seem questionable whether analysing an Indigenous work through art historical methods with Western tradition is appropriate or even necessary. However, Knopf argues that also tools of Western film analysis must be employed when Indigenous filmmakers utilise Western film technology. Thus, methods of art history are necessary when describing a hybrid work such as *Birds in the Earth* which uses Western film technology and the contextualisation of the Finnish National Gallery. "Rules and techniques, as well as channels of distribution are [also] largely similar."[57] As there is no separate methodology and terminology for describing and analysing Indigenous artworks, the art historical traditional tools are employed.

One of the oldest methods in art history is iconography – "the study of images"[58] which was developed by art historian Erwin Panofsky.[59] In his approach, the artwork is divided into three layers of interpretation which focus on different information from and about the artwork.[60] Through studying cultures and their processes of image-making in an art historical interpretation, motifs and images in works of art are identified. Immersing the image in its broader cultural context helps finding characteristics which tie the image into a specific culture and time. Iconography aims at retrieving the symbolic and allegorical meanings contained in works of art. "A symbol is something that is widely recognized as representing an idea or entity. […] An allegory is a narrative, using a set of symbols that is widely recognized to represent an idea or entity."[61] After identifying these iconographies, motifs, symbols and allegories, they are interpreted in their cultural context which is usually a construction as we can only approach and assume the specific context of artworks. In the late 1960s, these presumptions were criticised. The viewer and the social context in shaping works of art became more important.

Similarly in semiotics, the theory of signs, the aim is to decipher what a sign represents.[62] The contextuality of signs and how they refer to each other is called *intertextuality*.[63] One sign can be linked to a certain meaning and change its interpretation when connected to another. One sign can also be understood as different things, depending on the person who deciphers it. This is an important aspect in my thesis as I compare and combine my own interpretation with the ones of

[57] Knopf 2008, xiii.
[58] D'Alleva 2005, 17.
[59] See Panofsky 2002.
[60] Panofsky 2002, 50.
Panofsky divides his interpretation into the pre-iconographic description based on practical experience, the iconographic analysis from literary sources and the iconological interpretation through synthetic intuition.
[61] D'Alleva 2005, 23.
[62] D'Alleva 2005, 28.
[63] D'Alleva 2005, 35. For Julia Kristeva's theory on intertextuality see Kristeva and Moi 1986.

three Sámi spectators. This reveals what art historian Norman Bryson describes as "the openness of the artwork"[64] with interpretations being open to multiple overlapping sign systems.

This multiplicity is also tied to each art historian interpreting a cultural practice: "Each person, each generation, each culture reinterprets artworks, finding in them new significance."[65] Art historical interpretations, such as this thesis, are a search for insight, an ongoing process of interpretation and they stem from an experience through the art historian's senses. In contrast to theoretically informed art history, the ideology of empiricism emphasises observation and interpretation instead of theoretical constructs. Deleuzian empiricism is described as expansion, production, creativity and multiplicities.[66]

Art historian Anne D'Alleva describes that "[i]n art history, we could say that theory helps us to develop precise and penetrating lines of questioning to guide our research."[67] Theory helps you to think about a subject, widening your perspective and yet, theory itself has a cultural context as well.[68] Contemporary theoretically informed art history embraces the subject's context, reception, connected institutions, relations of power, ideology and production. Theories from other disciplines, such as political theory, anthropology, psychoanalysis and cultural studies, are studied for a wider understanding and interpretation of an artwork.[69] This selective interdisciplinarity helps the art historian to formulate more precise questions in a more specific context.

In the case of *Birds in the Earth*, several theories would be logical to apply. Feminist art history, for example, addresses "the issue of female gender – that is, the idea of femininity and/or the experience of being a woman"[70]. Gender identity affects an artist's imagery and how they represent women. In *Birds in the Earth*, two female ballet dancers are performing, forming and informing the narrative. Feminist theory would make a fruitful theory informing an art historical interpretation. Yet, in this thesis, I chose to use decolonising theory as described before, focusing on the culturally informed narrative of the short film. Decolonising and decentering as terms give a more ongoing feel to the exploitation still present in neo-colonial relationships.[71]

Although art history has been criticised to also reproduce differences in class, sexuality, race, and ethnicity, an art historian's questions can include contexts and relations of academia and the

[64] D'Alleva 2005, 37.
[65] D'Alleva 2005, 12.
[66] D'Alleva 2005, 13.
[67] D'Alleva 2005, 6.
[68] D'Alleva 2005, 8.
[69] D'Alleva 2005, 11.
[70] D'Alleva 2005, 61.
[71] D'Alleva 2005, 78.

everyday world.[72] Reception theory in art history has focused on the spectator's experience and interpretation. "[It] shifts attention from the artist to the viewer"[73] and embraces interdisciplinarity. Art historian Oskar Bätschmann is only one example of a hermeneutic approach starting from the aesthetic experience in order to form an interpretation. In addition to an artwork's context, he reminds us of the translation work an art historian creates when articulating in words which is experienced in sensory perception.[74] Bätschmann proposes to acknowledgement of a work's incomprehensibility as triggering starting point for an interpretation. "Interpretation begins in articulating our incomprehension […] as a series of questions."[75]

Then, the interpretation is built on pre-understanding. *Birds in the Earth* asks for a specific pre-understanding: "An Indigenous Studies background is necessary to situate Indigenous filmmaking in general and the films in particular in their historical and socio-political contexts."[76] As Bätschmann suggests, interpretations are started with acknowledging incomprehensibility which persisted even after studying literary sources about the Sámi. In this thesis, the Sámi interviewees bring perspectives and pre-understanding to the content. Indigenous films are of hybrid nature which demands for a combination of theories and methods. Merging traditionally distinct spheres of inquiry to match a set of research questions is called middle-level research. Rather than by doctrines, it is driven by in-depth questions which have both empirical and theoretical import.[77] Reflecting on the foregoing art historical and cultural theories merges into a base for interpreting *Birds in the Earth* with notions of respect, gentleness and care.

[72] D'Alleva 2005, 86.
[73] D'Alleva 2005, 109.
[74] Bätschmann 2003, 181.
[75] Bätschmann 2003, 184.
[76] Knopf 2008, xiv.
[77] Bordwell and Carroll 1996, 27–28.

3. Equipping methods and materials

3.1. From theory to method

While D'Alleva describes "theory as the process of formulating research questions"[78], thus methodology can be seen as the process of formulating ways of answering those questions. In this thesis, the set of means and methods available to an art historian on the theoretical basis previously introduced, is complemented by artistic, journalistic, cultural and oral history approaches.

Artist and researcher Lea Kantonen has used artistic methods to examine questions about the experience of Indigenous people similar to my research inquiries. The works co-created with youngsters in her workshops, Kantonen describes as simultaneously art and research. In *Teltta: kohtaamisia nuorten taidetyöpajoissa*[79] (in English: 'Tent. Encounters in Workshops with Young People'), she writes about regarding participants as collaborators rather than objects of research.

Another example for approaching the sensitive topic of Indigenous culture, history and experience, comes from the Finnish journalist researchers Jaana Kanninen and Kukka Ranta. In their recent collaboration *Vastatuuleen – Saamen kansan pakkosuomalaistamisesta* ("Against the wind – About the Sámi being forced to become Finnish", own translation), their starting point was the question of what the Sámi would like the Finnish population to know about the Sámi and their position in Finland. For several years, Kanninen and Ranta met and interviewed Sámi people on topics such as landownership, colonising the mind and the Sámi identity. In an e-mail interview, Ranta emphasises the importance of gaining the Sámis' trust by meeting several times, getting to know them in a calm pace and also discussing about possible distrust against the Finnish.[80] When writing about the Sámi experiential history and present, it was crucial to continuously be aware whether the text contained the writers' assumptions or feelings actually experienced by the Sámi. This meant constant back and forth discussions with the interviewees about what and how to formulate the text. When Bätschmann reminds of acknowledging own incomprehensibility, Ranta adds to this identification and acceptance of own Finnish hidden ways of exercising power against the Sámi. In *Vastatuuleen*, Kanninen and Ranta show humbleness and great sensitivity which Ranta states as indispensable in a work which deals with trauma and colonialism. Comparing their book to other journalistic work they have created, Kanninen expresses that the journalist usually holds the content and journalistic decisions firmly in their own hands. Yet, in *Vastatuuleen*, Kanninen and Ranta felt more like borrowing

[78] D'Alleva 2005, 13.
[79] Kantonen 2005.
[80] Kukka Ranta's e-mail to Jaana Kanninen and author 20.4.2020.

their voices to the Sámi or acting as a bridge between the Sámi communities and the addressed mainland Finnish audience.[81]

3.2. From monophony to polyphony

Becoming aware of and borrowing your voice as researcher to others introduces at least two voices. In the humanities, the last half-century has shown a shift towards a polyphonic history. Polyphony comes from the Greek word *polyphōnía* which translates to "variety of tones".[82] In his article *Cultural history as polyphonic history*, Peter Burke describes polyphonic history as emphasising the dialogue instead of the monologue and telling "multiple stories rather than a single Grand Narrative".[83] In research, this means a plurality of approaches coexisting and building conversations. Polyphonic history embraces how a viewpoint was formed. Interpreting and therefore also translating a source into your own words always includes a cultural translation.[84] This becomes more difficult the further apart the assumptions are, which arise from the two cultures of the original author and the interpreter. This asks for maintaining a critical look at the sources. Similar to the journalists' work in *Vastatuuleen*, the historian becomes a mediator listening to various voices of multiple sources and between the lines of a single text.

In the case of art historical research, sources are often visual instead of literary. Concerning the limitations and qualities of different media of the sources, Burke notes: "Images are more powerful than words, partly because they work faster, but they are also more ambiguous and liable to be understood by different viewers in ways even more diverse than the interpretation of the same text by different readers."[85] The voices expressed in an image are manifold due to the rich possibilities of interpretation by the spectators.

The plurality of voices in art history becomes especially influential when the art historian's culture differs from the cultural content of the interpreted artwork. In the case of my thesis, this meant adding the voices of Sámi interviewees to my own and to the literary sources found in earlier research. In the interviews, I was mainly asking about the interviewees' experiences and understandings of the short film in general and of specific scenes. Instead of strictly pre-formulated questions, the interview consisted of a non-scripted dramaturgy of questions and themes. Despite a

[81] Jaana Kanninen's e-mail to Kukka Ranta and author 21.4.2020.
[82] "Polyphony" n.d.
[83] Burke 2010, 479.
[84] Burke 2010, 484.
[85] Burke 2010, 481.

rather free order of the topics, all of them were covered in each interview. In order to avoid own assumptions as much as possible, all questions were open-ended. Through this type of research in conversation, both sides are given the chance to engage in talk.[86] For a broader understanding of each interviewee's cultural background, we would also talk about their personal history and situation which are not disclosed. It was important to let the conversation have a natural evolution for both parties to gain trust and confidence in understanding each other. The interviews were not held in English which meant translating, in addition to framing the content into an art historical analysis, shows my voice as mediator and interpreter of the plurality of voices.

3.3. From voices to narrative spaces

An interview is not only a tool for research. Instead of extracting data from informants, knowledge is exchanged with our contemporaries. This opens up dialogues between two human worlds which have not communicated with each other for a long time.[87] So there are several narrators in the interpretation chapter of this thesis. It is not a monologue. As interviews are co-created and not simply found in an archive, they are of bivocal nature by definition. Therefore, interviews can be read and interpreted on many levels.[88]

The interviews conducted for this thesis can be compared to oral history interviews. Historian Donald Ritchie describes memory as the core of oral history. "Simply put, oral history collects memories and personal commentaries of historical significance through recorded interviews. An oral history interview generally consists of a well-prepared interviewer questioning an interviewee and recording their exchange in audio or video format."[89] Like oral history interviews, the interviews for this thesis are not meant as mere question-and-answer sessions but as ways to create and collect narrative possibilities.[90] Although my interest laid in the interviewees' experience of *Birds in the Earth*, an interview cannot provide direct access to such embodied knowledge. It is rather "a verbal rendition of the memory of that experience, generated by the presence of the interviewer."[91] In this interplay of two people, both interviewee and interviewer are invited to look inside themselves and find words for their questions and answers. Kanninen and Ranta emphasised the formation of trust between

[86] Archibald 2008, 377.
[87] Portelli 2018, 241.
[88] Portelli 2018, 248.
[89] Ritchie 2015, 1.
[90] Portelli 2018, 245.
[91] Portelli 2018, 246.

interviewee and interviewer. In addition, it is important for the interviewer to prepare to accept unexpected narratives, as some might change or even counteract to initial ideas and expectations.

The interviewer gives form to the content by generating the questions. Portelli describes oral history interviews as dialogues, where the narrative is co-created. Yet, the precondition of such dialogues simultaneously lies in an interview's power: "the reason we are seeking the interview is because we are different"[92]. In this case, the cultural background constitutes this necessary contrast. Yet, interviewee and interviewer meet on common ground, which is the wish for exchange as bridge crossing this distinction. In an interview, or *inter/view* as Portelli emphasises it, both persons are seen and heard. "An inter/view is an exchange of gazes".[93] A dialogue means "to speak across" or "to speak beyond". Through the exchange of gazes in an oral history interview, we can bridge gaps of distinction which opens up new shared spaces. This co-created possibility for common ground can be called a narrative space.

3.4. The interviews

Contact with the three interviewees was formed through mutual acquaintances without prior contact between the interviewer and the interviewees. At the time of the conduction of the interviews, none of the three interviewees was permanently living in Sápmi, yet all are in continuous contact with their friends and family who live there. Two of the interviewees were born and raised in Sápmi. The third interviewee has ancestors in Sápmi and lived there for several years, yet grew up in the mainland of Finland. All three interviewees identify as Sámi although the third participant stated to feel a little uncomfortable about participating as Sámi in this interview without having grown up in Sápmi. All interviewees were adults, two of which female and one male. The interviewees remain anonymous and I refer to them gender-neutrally as gender is not a focus point here.

When contacting each interviewee individually, permission was asked to conduct an interview of approximately one to two hours concerning their understanding and experience of the short film *Birds in the Earth*.[94] Each interviewee was proposed to bring an item that represents their Sámi identity. It can be challenging to find words about one's own cultural background, from which we perceive our surroundings and therefore also a short film. The concept of identity is abstract, yet often we associate it with personal memories and experiences, which might link to physical objects. Choosing and bringing such object as representation of their Sámi identity added a communication

[92] Portelli 2018, 241.
[93] Portelli 2018, 239.
[94] Consent forms signed by interviewee and author 2020.

tool to the interview. The item could function as a gate into the abstraction of the interviewee's Sámi identity and as thought-provoking impulse for the interviewees and myself. Similarly, *Birds in the Earth* can be seen as a representation of Helander's Sámi identity and therefore, comparing the items and stories behind them with the short film could be food for thought regarding the interpretations.

The three interviews were all conducted in February 2020 (5.2., 19.2. and 23.2.) at the café of the Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma. After meeting an interviewee in the entrance space of the museum, we would go straight to the exhibition spaces together. In order to minimise my influence on the interviewees' experience of the film, no further instructions or explanations were given beforehand. Together with each interviewee I watched the short film once. One of them had already seen the piece before and the two others had not. I stayed in the exhibition space with them to experience their reaction and mood during each scene. This gave insight about their intuitive response and could be referred to later during the conversation. After watching the film, we took a seat in the museum café and I asked for permission to record our conversation. The durations of the recorded conversations are 57 minutes 19 seconds, 1 hour 29 minutes 29 seconds and 49 minutes 36 seconds.

Each conversation started with the interviewees telling about where they grew up where they live now, how they are related to and participate in the Sámi culture and where their ancestors come from. In addition, we talked about their own occupation and family's professions. Further, the topics of the conversations ranged from politics to art philosophy to environmental issues, depending on which themes were relevant for each interviewee in the context of *Birds in the Earth*. In addition to this reflection of the individual interviewee's Sámi identity, each interview covered the following topics and questions linking the conversations to *Birds in the Earth* and opening up narrative spaces: What do you think the video is about? Do you think, there is an overall narrative in the short film and if so what does it mean to you? Which references and stories do you notice in *Birds in the Earth*? How did you experience them? How do you experience the switch of ballet and Sámi costumes? What do the lassoed items in the snow represent for you? How do you understand the scene at Finnish parliament house where the twins dance wildly in their *gákti*? What does it mean to you that the dancers keep spinning in the ending of the film? Are there other scenes which are meaningful to you and if so which ones and how? What does the title *Birds in the Earth* mean to you? Coming from the hypothesis that we understand our surroundings intuitively and automatically according to our previous experience and background, are there aspects in this short film which you as a Sámi think that a Finnish person does not notice or understand?

3.5. From interviews to interpretations

After opening up these narrative spaces concerning *Birds in the Earth*, the next step was to rearrange the information into an art historical analysis and interpretation of the short film. First, each interview was transcribed in its original language while simultaneously searching for suitable translations into English. For further processing, I followed the approach of a phenomenological analysis as it aims to investigate the lived world experience or in this case the experience of the short film.[95] As interviews are inherently bivocal co-creations, there are several levels which can be analysed. In this case, the focus was on interpreting *Birds in the Earth* which was also the main focal point in this phenomenological analysis. For identifying the reoccurring themes of each individual interview and for grouping topics overarching the three interviews, these had to be listened to and read multiple times. Deciphering and describing each interviewee's experience and interpretation meant comparing those with each other, to the short film, to my literary sources and to my own analysis. Through this analytical style meaning-units were formed, each opening a separate, yet, interconnected narrative possibility.

For the interpretations, I have grouped the narrative possibilities roughly according to the short film's sections of choreography, costumes, as well as scenography and props. The sections engage with the narrative interpretations of *Birds in the Earth* illuminating each topic from different perspectives through various voices. Instead of offering a linear and logical narrative, the interpretations are diffused by the multiplicity of the narrative possibilities. Decentering the interpretation creates a branched out network of meanings with the short film as its stem and common denominator. Through arguing for multiple narratives, the spectator is invited to switch between perspectives, possibly decentralising the habit of searching for the one correct interpretation.

[95] Sullivan 2012, 83–84.

4. Descriptive analysis

Two Indigenous dancers performing the ballet choreography *Dying swan* in front of the Finnish parliament house – this was Marja Helander's initial idea of what later evolved into her short film *Birds in the Earth* (*Eatnanvuloš lottit*, *Maan sisällä linnut*, 2018, video, duration 10 minutes 40 seconds).[96] The finished product was created with collaboration and free association working closely, for example, with the choreographers and dancers Katja and Birit Haarla.

The short film communicates through the relations between two dancing bodies and the landscape surrounding them. In addition to classic ballet, there are absurd scenes with symbolic value. We can observe the two identically looking young girls in both a natural arctic landscape and in an urban city environment. Helander describes the film as follows:

> "*Birds in the Earth* is an Indigenous short film based on dance, youth and experimental storytelling. The film studies the situation of the Sámi culture in Finland. […] The polarity of Nature and the Western way of life is filtered through sharp humour. […] It was interesting to combine this really disciplined art form [of ballet dance] to the wild nature. The film tells also about the contradiction between Sámi people and the state of Finland, concerning the ownership of the land and the sovereignty of Sámi people."[97]

Before investigating the different narratives of the short film divided into the chapters of choreography, costume, props and scenography, the next part describes what we can see and hear in the short film. This linear description gives an overview about the visual and audio content of the video as base for the following interpretations.

Summarised journey

The sound of a bass clarinet introduces us to the first scene, where we are looking at the back of two people standing side by side (see cover image). Their long brown hair is blowing in the wind while their shoulders are covered by white scarves with pastel coloured ornaments. A midnight blue cloth is peaking through the scarf's fringes. A delicate jewellery is dangling from the one ear that the blowing wind is uncovering from the hair. As their upper bodies turn towards us, the protagonists hold a straight look into the camera for several seconds (figure 1). Their bodies seem still to be directed away from us while their heads have turned to a 3/4 view. Their identically looking faces are relaxed.

[96] Sundance Institute 2019.
[97] Sundance Institute 2019.

They are presumably female twins. Their scarves are secured by a big decorative silver brooch. The turn has opened up a blurred view into the landscape they were previously looking at.

Still standing at the same spot in the middle of the frame, we can see the girls now from a farther distance. They are facing the camera frontally and holding hands. They are wearing knee-long blue dresses with a vivid red hem and white and black accentuations margining the sleeves and skirt. A belt with round silver elements embraces the slim waist. Their legs are covered with black tights and the feet with red leg warmers and terracotta-coloured shoes with red and blue pompoms. The ground is of rough rock and reddish moss. The foggy blue and grey sky is filling most of the frame. The intense blue and red colours of the girls' costumes seem to be picking up the colours of the environment, yet intensifying their brightness and saturation. In comparison to their environment, the girls seem rather small. The sound of a harmonium is joining the bass clarinet. Simultaneously to the rising tone of the soundscape, the twins let go of each other's hands and raise their arms creating an oval shape around their heads. We notice this movement repeating in several scenes.

A quick switch brings us into a different setup with a similar pose. Only now the girls' hair is in a strict bun and their free flowing dresses have been exchanged for white ballet costumes with a ballet skirt, pointe shoes and white tights. Their long-stretched position makes the girls appear tall and lean. Behind them we see still waters, maybe a lake, surrounded by dark needle trees. The ground is of arctic forest vegetation. By opening their arms wide to the sides, the twins start moving in gracious ballet patterns. As they raise onto pointed toes, they take tiny steps on the spot, whilst their arms begin to smoothly and slowly flap as if they were wings instead.

An interluded bird's-eye view carries us across a snowy landscape with leafless trees casting long shadows (figure 2). We notice two fresh tracks of footprints. Back with the dancers, we see them close up as they raise and lower their arms in slow round movements amidst this white landscape. The bright sun provides for a warm glow on the dancers' skin, yet their red lips and concentrated look tell of the freezing temperature.

The girls are walking on this icy snow in the following scene. Slightly off-beat to the bass clarinet, they take long steps behind each other. The camera follows so that they remain in the same position of the image, while the background moves past. They pass what seems to be a supermarket and a gas station. In the background we see a snow-covered fell with a pole on top of it. We hear the dancers' footsteps crunching on the icy snow. As the girls keep walking and performing their ballet choreography, we see and hear a man in a winter jacket and hat closing his car's trunk, opening the door of the driver's seat, starting the engine and driving off. The camera slightly slows down lingering

on this occurrence as the girl in the front walks out of the frame. The twins keep walking and repeating the same arm movements while gently placing one foot in front of the other.

Back to the bird's-eye view across the snow landscape, the camera moves towards the upper edge of the frame until it shows the two traces of footprints meeting. From ground level, we watch leafless birches in the white snowy landscape. The sun is peaking through from the upper left corner. The soundscape grows more quiet and the girls suddenly run into the frame. They stop behind each other, throwing a red and a yellow lasso into the air and across the frame. The flying lassos are shown in a closeup and we hear the sound of them untangling. Shortly, we watch the girls from a close left frontal angle, as they pull on their lassos. The full scene unfolds as the red lasso in the front drags a stuffed red fox on a piece of wood into the frame. It is followed by a microwave caught by the yellow cord. A short closeup shows the head of the fox while we hear three vocal tones sung by a female voice. This audio theme appears several times throughout the short film.

The girls are freeing their prey from the robes and multiple closeups follow: a blond doll's face, the head of a stuffed arctic fox in its summer coat, a dark-haired doll with red fingernails and lips, a microwave and a black toaster with a skull-and-bones image and a stuffed white willow grouse with a blurred object in the background. The girls have collected their lassos which are now hanging rolled up in a loop across their bodies. They are surrounded by the previously seen objects in addition to a stuffed marten, a tennis racket and a colourful skateboard, a long cleaning broom and a grey wheel cover, a big stuffed white bird's – possibly a swan's – wing, a golden ballroom dancing shoe, an embroidery showing a blond female angel spreading her arms above two walking children – probably a variation of the painting *Guardian Angel* by Bernhard Plockhorst. The twins are standing behind an old harmonium. Together they lift its cover, raise their hands, exchange a look (figure 3) and in the next frame we see a closeup of their fingers pressing down on the harmonium's keys while a vibrating sound commences.

Location and season change as the camera cuts to hovering across a dark green moss landscape with more leafless birches. The twins are continuing their ballet choreography. We are watching them through the birch branches. For a moment the camera takes us closer to the dancers, zooming on their faces and upper body. As the sound fades out, the camera retreats. The dancers have frozen into a long-stretched pose. A lingering sound slowly appears.

The next frame shows a crooked red wooden pole with a sign saying "VALTION MAATA" with the subtitles "State-owned land" and "Stáhta eana" amidst green-leaved birch trees, green grass and moss ground. On each side of the pole one twin is balancing on one leg while holding onto the pole with one hand. The other arm is in a curved position next to the head. A slow stretching

choreography is performed in this position. A blurry bug, moth or butterfly is flying through the image. The sounds in this scene are a high-pitched whistle which might imitate bird sounds together with a deep vibrating tone.

Suddenly, the dancers have changed their appearance into their blue dresses and open hair. Standing still they look straight into the camera (figure 4). We hear a male voice singing, as the frame switches closer and the ballet choreography continues. The twins turn and we watch them from a distance, as they at once hold red scarves in their hands. Reaching up to the "VALTION" part of the sign, they try to cover it with their scarves. When the scarves hit the sign, the girls are back in their blue dresses and the scarves have turned white again for a short moment. All that remains of the sign is "MAATA"; the subtitles state "Land", "Eana". Back in their ballet costumes, the twins exchange a look and walk away.

With an accelerated rhythm in both movement and female-sung audio, the ballet girls are moving forwards while dancing, spinning and jumping on an elevated ridge of rocky land. The foreground is covered in green moss and grass. We watch the dance through branches and blurred moths or mosquitos as the camera follows.

The sound fades transporting us to the next location. The girls are standing with their back towards the camera on stones of a riverbed between fells. Together with the ascending camera, the dancers lift their arms into the round shape we have seen before, emphasised by the familiar female voice singing a three tone vocal sound. After a short silence, the voice continues and the camera is hovering over a dark green landscape. Spots of rock peak through what appears to be moss. There are fences crossing the land and patches of dark blue water.

Next, we watch the girls walking up from the water onto a street. On the roadside, there is an advertising board with a bear wearing a red scarf and an "OPEN" sign hanging from its arm which points towards the road. Now on a small path, the girls dance and move forward between pine trees. Behind them we see a playground with a sandpit and toy cars. In the back, there is a broad wooden cabin. The bass clarinet is playing a calm melody in minor key. The dancers pass a wooden swing, benches and tables. On top of the cabin are huge white letters spelling the word "Karhu", in English 'bear'. At the entrance, there are a flag of Finland and some flower decorations. Between the dancers and the camera stands a stand-in photo prop picturing three bears with a red scarf spelling "Karhutupa", 'bear cabin'. A red coca cola sun umbrella, more flowers and a big white sign with the words "SOUVENIRS & CAFÉ" are crossed. In the back, there are some animal statues: an owl, a reindeer with a red rope around its antlers and a sleigh on the front porch, several smaller bear statues and a big standing bear with another red rope around his neck. There might be Sámi and

Finnish flags, yet they are tangled and not clearly recognisable. The camera is passing another stand-in photo prop: two figures in similar costumes as the dancers' blue dresses and a reindeer's upper body wearing a red collar with a bell and the spelling "Tapsan Tapuli". As the camera retreats from the location, the dancers are standing with crossed legs and high gaze next to the two stand-in photo props, each of the girls holding the leash of a white long-haired dog. In the back, we see a blue road sign saying "Karhunpesäkivi 0,2". During this last part, the bass clarinet is replaced by white noise.

We identify the sounds belonging to a city and its tram traffic as we see the girls walking and dancing between tall buildings with stone and classicist facades. Shop signs are illuminated and advertise businesses such as "Handelsbanken" and "ROLEX". A green 7-tram is taking a turn to the left as we watch the girls march on from a worm's-eye view making them and the buildings appear tall.

The girls show up behind a row of large granite columns. As they alternate appearing and disappearing circling the columns moving forwards towards the camera, they are surrounded by the granite material. Arriving at the seventh column, we see a stuffed reindeer facing the entrance door of the building on the right. Without noting the reindeer, the dancers pass in front of it.

Now, most of the building shows with the row of columns and a vast set of stairs in the front as the camera is directed diagonally up to the sky from a distant point of view. Up there, two birds are circling around each other as if they were dancing as well. We hear the imitation of bird sounds. The camera shifts down and the twins wearing their blue dresses appear in the frame without scarves or black tights but with their hair in a ponytail. Their movements are now much more loose. They shake their limbs almost uncontrollably. Their long hair and the red ruffled hem of the dresses enlarge and emphasise the wild movements (figure 5). Their mouths are open and their body tension is more relaxed than in the ballet sequences. The camera is also moving more freely in a half circle in front of the dancers.

A dramatic harmonium and echoing thunder sheet sounds appear. The frame is changed to a wide worm's-eye view exposing the whole upper part of the monumental building. A sharp diagonal shadow is cast down on the stairs. On an interruption of the steps, the twins are turning round and round flapping their arms like wings. They are back in their ballet costumes. We see their tippling toes as closeup on the sun-illuminated granite floor. Stopping the spin, the girls sit down on their back leg, cross their arms in the front and lay their head down. For a brief moment, we see the reindeer standing on the lower end of the stairs, facing the left. The stiff columns and the uniform material of the building and stairs form a still atmosphere as the sounds have faded out as well.

We are back in the green landscape with the wooden fences. A closeup shows the twins spinning on tip toes in circles again while flapping their wing-like arms. The female voice is singing accompanied

by a harmonium. As the view switches to bird's eye, the female singing voice in the imaginary language replaces the earlier sound. We watch the ballet dancers continue their circling and flapping amidst a rocky ground covered with small stones. The camera slowly rotates in the same direction as the dancers as it continuously retreats farther away from them. The round fence appears in the frame, revealing its branched out structure. The ground around the circle is of intense green with a couple of stony pathways (figure 6). We only just see the bright green roof of a building as the image gradually fades to black. The female voice keeps singing during the final credits accompanied by the bass clarinet.

5. Polyphonic interpretations

After the descriptive analysis of the audio-visuals of *Birds in the Earth*, this chapter draws narratives and interpretations risen from art historical research as well as from the interviews. These narrative possibilities are grouped into the frameworks of choreography, costumes, props and scenography.

In this dance video, choreography is one of the crucial vehicles for the content. The strict art of ballet dance transports us through the film and the dancers' movement and body give the spectators the opportunity to empathise. The costumes and especially the costume changes tell us about the identities of the protagonists. Through the two differing appearances, specific scenes are highlighted and the film's dramaturgical curve is painted. Props and scenography of *Birds in the Earth* provide physical context to the actions. Together with the scenography, the props bring a humorous nuance to the short film. Placing and interaction with objects and surroundings create an absurdity, which visualises the complexity of the subject matters as well as leaves the spectator with questions. Similar to the costumes, the scenography underlines the contrast between cultures and life styles. Additionally, as the Sámi form a strong togetherness with land and environment, this raises scenography and props into an active role of meaning-making.

The overall uniting hypothesis of interpreting *Birds in the Earth* as an exploration of the Sámi culture, history and contemporary identity stems from clear references. As mentioned before, Helander examines her own Sámi identity and general Sámi discourses in her artistic work. Furthermore, the two dancers and choreographers Birit and Katja Haarla are Sámi themselves. The short film contains numerous references to Sámi culture. These include the traditional Sámi costume *gákti* and the traditional Sámi music *joik.* The homeland of the Sámi called Sápmi is used as as scenography for multiple scenes as well as in the opening environment. Lassos used in the traditional livelihood of reindeer herding and Sámi scarves appear as props to illustrate the narratives. Audio and visual leads form the basis for interpreting the movie in the context of the Sámi.

5.1. Choreography

Choreography describes "the composition and arrangement of dances especially for ballet", yet it also refers to "the art of symbolically representing dancing"[98]. After a linear run-through of the choreographic elements and their narratives, the following segment compares the dance parts of *Birds in the Earth* to the classical ballet choreographies *Swan Lake* and the *Dying Swan.* There, I

[98] "Choreography" n.d.

examine what meaning can derive from the short film through possible analogies and contrasts. As choreography in the broader sense comprises non-dance sequences as well, the following investigates the scenes and their significance in the short film as a whole. Lastly in this segment, the choreography of *Birds in the Earth* is put into the context of the Sámi music art form of *joik*, exploring the suggestions of traditional Sámi storytelling and classical ballet as a joint concept: a dance *joik*. Before comparing the short film to other sources, we examine the different movement qualities shown in *Birds in the Earth* and their input to the narrative.

5.1.1. Moving through the scenes

Birds in the Earth starts with the twins turning towards us while standing still. As they release the hold on each other's hands, they commence with a ballet choreography. It guides us throughout the whole film.

Ballet language

Ballet as its own distinct art form emerged in the fifteenth century from aristocratic entertainment. Court members dressed up in order to perform dances including sung and spoken word drawing mythological and allegorical images. Later, the Russian style has had a great influence on ballet up until how we know it today.[99] Only in the beginning of the 18th century, Italian Carlo Blasis, "the father of classical ballet technique", assembled a system of positions and movements which are still used as base for contemporary ballet.[100] Nowadays, ballet is a globally well-known and appreciated art form which has its own sub-cultures depending on region and tradition. Despite Blasis' technical system, ballet is still strongly rooted in memory instead of scripts or standardised notations. It has a strong, yet fading oral and physical tradition and is passed down to the next generation through embodied knowledge of the dancers and choreographers.[101]

In *Birds in the Earth*, the twins seem to be dressed up in order to convey their story in the universal language that is ballet. Posing a clear contrast to a natural arctic environment, the ballet costume and techniques create a meaningful but also humorous atmosphere throughout the scenes. This absurdity, which raises questions in the spectator, is emphasised in scenes where the ballet costume

[99] McParland 2013, 178.
[100] Allardt et al. 1981, 279–282.
[101] McParland 2013, 178.

is combined with non-ballet context and movements. One example is the scene in which the girls throw lassos to catch modern household appliances in the snow. Helander and the protagonists use this old art form ballet for painting a contemporary discourse. Parallels of ballet and the traditional Sámi story-telling methods can be found. Both traditions are passed on through embodied and oral knowledge instead of written texts. In addition, both have diverse distinct traditions depending on the region. The ballet choreography in *Birds in the Earth* conveys a quiet inner pride of both traditions.

Natural movements

The short film's beginning and end share the movement of flapping wings. In the first scene, in which the twins are wearing ballet costumes, the dancers are taking the spectator on a journey. The following scene, as the camera hovers over the snowy landscape, the dancers have taken off with their wings and we can observe from their bird's-eye view. The season has changed, as the autumn colours are replaced by the white icy surroundings. Time has gone by as the twins land on the snow to guide the spectators around amidst the small birch trees.

As the dancers pass the supermarket and gas station with their long strides, the rhythm of these steps is recognised by interviewee A as belonging to a willow grouse. Interviewee A describes how there is also a traditional *joik* called *Rievssat (Snow Grouse)* by Sámi musician Wimme which illustrates this rhythm. Coincidentally or not, Wimme is also one of the sound designers for *Birds in the Earth*. Interviewee A sees the girls clearly mimicking the walk of a willow grouse as they pass the Uulan Säästö shopping center in Utsjoki.[102]

The bird resemblance is interrupted by the following scene in which the girls throw their *suohpan* to catch household prey. A *suohpan* is a lasso used by the Sámi for reindeer herding. Even though in their ballet costumes, the illusion of a ballet performance is interrupted. The girls present themselves as humans again. Despite the obviously freezing temperatures, the dancers' serious faces underline the absurdity of the scene. Whereas we could relaxedly enjoy the view of the arctic landscapes and ballet choreography before, this scene demands the spectator to pay full attention. It is a reminder to the audience to stay alert instead of slipping into mere aesthetic pleasure through the provided view. It constitutes a metaphorical smack in the eye of the spectator reminding them that this short film contains a message.

[102] "Uulan Säästö Ky" n.d.

The girls are now surrounded by everyday objects. One of these is an electronic harmonium. They drop their fingers onto its keys, which evokes its sound to be heard in the following scenes. The dancers are portrayed as active and independent protagonists of their own story. If necessary, they walk through the icy snow, they provide for household items and they dance to their own tune, even though it sounds rather dark and melancholic.

The journey and ballet dance continue amidst the small birch trees. The twins are not flapping their wings anymore. Their movements and short still positions are aligning with the tree branches surrounding them. “Then, you need to know more about nature.”, interviewee A states. Interviewee A tells about the tundra and an autumnal moth catastrophe. A large amount of birch trees of the North died as moth ate away all the leaves. The Sámi are known to think of themselves not only connected to the land but rather of themselves and their land as unity. Taking care of the land meant equally to cater to your own needs. Traditionally, the Sámi used to harvest only what was necessary for the moment as resources would grow very slowly with long and harsh winters. Healthy birch trees are part of what fed animals which then in turn could be hunted by the Sámi. One of the traditional Sámi dishes includes the willow grouse, so “[w]hat kind of life is that for two willow grouses who do not have leaves to eat?”, interviewee A concludes with a tone of sadness. Despite the white ballet dresses in first glance seem to be out of place, the choreography enables the twins to blend in with their surroundings. With the melancholic harmonium, the dance seems to honour the birch trees and their fate.

Political movements

At the next location, the twins perform beside a signpost. Standing on one leg and holding onto the pole with one arm, the rest of their body moves in contrast to the signpost which is stiff and crooked as it announces “state-owned land”. The choreography at this location consists of dynamic poses. When following the thought of the previous scene, here the girls can also be seen as translating their static co-performer the signpost into ballet motions. Each of the dynamic poses seems to be copying its form and bringing it to life. Again, the aesthetic beauty of the performance is interrupted by the appearance of the girls in their *gákti*. In contrast to the ballet characters, they are standing still which can also be understood as an interpretation of the signpost. Shortly switching back to the ballet poses, the mystic flow of the scene continues, which is emphasised by the male *joik* voice and percussion sounds. The ballet poses build up suspense as suddenly the ballet girls are breaking from the ballet performing characters again like we saw before in the scene with the lassos. In contrast to the strictly planned ballet movements, the girls are moving freely, as they attempt to throw red

scarves onto the part of the sign, which says “state-owned”. For a brief moment, the *gákti* twins are taking over eventually covering the left side of the sign. Maybe this was a split-second in which the girls revealed their true form once more. Maybe the *gákti* gave them the necessary strength to throw the scarves. The girls are back in their ballet costumes and the blood red scarves are leaving only “land” to be seen on the signpost.

Interviewee A notes that the route shown on the short film is heading South across the land of the Sámi. The signpost reminds of the topic of landownership which has been and still is a major point of dispute for the Sámi. Established borders throughout the North have divided Sápmi into distinct areas and nationalities. Whereas the Sámi had ownership rights about their land at least until the 16th century, ninety percept of the Sámi homeland nowadays is state-owned. Despite the investigation of multiple committees, there is no official record about how and when the land has become state-owned. It has been thus argued that the landownership of Sápmi has never been legally transferred to the state. The ownership of the Sámi sempiternal land has become one of many unresolved disputes between the Sámi and the state of Finland.[103] Covering the “state-owned” part of the signpost can thus be seen as a symbolic gesture of disobedience against illegitimately established laws and their consequences. Furthermore, owning and ruling land is contradictory to how the Sámi experience togetherness of living beings including humans and land. Interviewee B emphasises on this communal aspect: When the “state-owned” sign is covered, only “land” is left. Interviewee B understands the message of this scene as a political statement: Either this land belongs to the Sámi or it has to be collective land. Recalling the ILO-169 convention, interviewee B ponders about this everlasting issue of landownership. There is a clear frustration between the lines of interviewee B and the will to go forwards in time. Interviewee B voices exhaustion that comes from the landownership dispute. Instead of reminiscing about the past, interviewee B has their eye on the practical present. Both Sámi and Finnish people have to be able to live together in harmony. Albeit, interviewee B admits to understand the need of the Sámi to participate in the decisions concerning land use.

As state-owned land also hunting permissions in Sápmi are regulated by the national government which is one of the things transferring the dispute about landownership to a practical level. Hence, interviewee A’s comment on how the landownership affects the animal world of the North, as interviewee A states that life might even be better for the willow grouses if Sámi had a greater say in land use. Interpreting the girls in *Birds in the Earth* as willow grouses, interviewee A continues: “The willow grouses claim that the hunting regulated by the state is not going well.” Nowadays, you have to get a legal authorisation for shooting birds with tourists as the main buyers. Interviewee A is

[103] Ranta and Kanninen 2019, 44.

clearly frustrated by the regulations as they ask: “Who has more rights in hunting and fishing: the tourists or the local inhabitants?”

The theme of land ownership continues if we connect the following two scenes. In the first, the girls are dancing and balancing in a fast pace on what seems to be a levee. For the next scene, they halt at the Tana riverbed. Interviewee A resumes about fishing laws which seem to give more rights to tourists than locals. “A couple of years ago, the regulations were changed again and it was a catastrophe for local companies and people.”, interviewee A reports. The Finnish state decreased 80 percent for the traditional Sámi fishing methods and only 40 percent for the touristic free fishing methods.[104] “Now, people are going to court about this.” After the adjustments of the Tana river agreement concerning fishing in 2017 activists gathered and established a moratorium on the Tiirasaari island amidst the Tana river. Here, they declared the new Tana river agreement not to be valid, as it prohibits practicing and passing on of the traditional Sámi fishing practices. The new agreement was protested against not only by the Sámi but by most locals. Whereas the Sámi feared for losing their tradition, entrepreneurs were scared to lose their livelihood. The main complaint for the activists were not the fishing restrictions but the fact that once again the Sámi were overlooked, thus not heard, during negotiation process which lasted a total of five years. “To us, it feels like they are killing us, and nobody is paying attention. They don’t kill us with guns, but slowly and silently”,[105] one of the activists states in a video asking others to join him with continue to fish in the Tana river as civil disobedience against the new law. While the *Ellos Deatnu!*[106] group, which formed through these protests, is well-known in the Sámi community most Finnish people know nothing about these things as interviewee A recounts. Interviewee B agrees: If you have not heard about the fishing permit dispute, you would not guess it from the film. “It might only appear like a beautiful landscape.”

Comparing the Tana river scene to another occurrence of the Sámi history, the re-settlement due to building hydroelectric power stations comes to mind. In addition to being forced to adjust the annual routes of the Sámi reindeer when the national borders were set, the Sámi also had to leave their home regions to make space for reservoirs.[107] In 1954, the state and premier minister had come to the official decision of erecting a hydroelectric power station at the river Kemi which is up until now the longest river in the state of Finland. Again, the Sámi were faced with accomplished facts about the construction. Many had to sell their land whereby the means of trade with the state-owned Kemijokiyhtiö were experienced as questionable. Less than a decade later, building another reservoir

[104] Ranta 2017.
[105] Holmberg 2017.
[106] Holmberg and Beaska, n.d.
Ellos Deatnu! refers to the Deatnu (Tana) agreement and means *Long Live Deatnu!* in English.
[107] See Ranta and Kanninen 2019, 33–80.

required a similar procedure. Only this time, the Sámi were protesting against it. In the end, not everyone was willing to sell their land which led to the expropriation of estates. In total 640 residents had to leave their homeland. The water flooded not only villages of the people. Land with arctic berries, fields and nesting areas for birds such as the Siberian jay, swans and goose were lost under the reservoir. Smaller rivers were filled with dead fish due to oxygen deficiency.[108] The twins dancing across the elevated strip of land and raising their arms at the Tana river bring back associations with these earlier and contemporary incidents. In a quick pace, the dancers have crossed the dam and gaze at the Tana river which forms a symbol for the togetherness of the Sámi and their homeland. When the girls raise their arms into an oval shape above their heads, it shows their appreciation for and embedment into their homeland.

Coming to a halt

The twins have left the previous sequence of the Tana river. The attention is directed towards the sights where the twins are dancing ballet. Walking up casually from a lake or river onto a street presents itself to us as a short interlude or introduction to the next topic: tourism. They pass through the yard of the Karhutupa at the Karhunpesäkivi (in English: 'Bear's den rock', own translation), a well-known tourist attraction at the Ivalo-Inari-highway. To the Sámi, the Karhutupa at the Karhunpesäkivi is known for malpractice. All three interviewees recognise the Karhutupa and connect it to appropriation. Interviewee A recognises it immediately: "The souvenirs sold there are from China instead of real Sámi products. The people who stood at the cottages and who were filmed by tourists were not Sámi." The experience of tourism for the Sámi and Lapland is mixed. Clearly, the Sámi are often being commercialised, yet interviewee C notes that tourists wish for information on the Sámi. Many tourists have learned about the Sámi before coming to the North. Some might have obtained even more basic knowledge than the Finnish as interviewee C claims. Nevertheless, there is a discrepancy between the Sámi culture advertised to tourists and the actual Sámi culture. Interviewee C worries about the kind of information that is spread about the Sámi: reindeer herding as livelihood living in huts in the North. These are old realities. Nowadays, most Sámi do not even live in Sápmi anymore and only a small amount lives from reindeer herding. Interviewee C wishes for the Sámi culture to lead the tourists instead of having the tourists define the Sámi culture. Similarly, interviewee A recounts how it is often difficult for tourists to experience lived Sámi culture. In the seventies and eighties, there was only the Sámi Museum Siida to see the real Sámi tradition and an annual summer handicraft exhibition "as well as the landscapes of course", interviewee A concludes.

[108] Ranta and Kanninen 2019, 60–79.

As the girls are holding the leashes of white dogs and being surrounded by the stand-in photo prop appropriation of the traditional Sámi costumes, they end another chapter on their journey. They are standing as still as the stand-in photo props, the wooden animal sculptures and the stuffed reindeer, facing away from the camera. Standing their ground they look away. The faceless and lifeless boards are showing the form into which the Sámi are often pressed by commercialisation and appropriation.

Colliding urban and Sámi identities

The stagnant melancholic bass clarinet including the sound of tram tracks carries us to the following location: Aleksanterinkatu in Helsinki. Aleksanterinkatu is one of the first and main business streets in Finland. It houses luxury brand shops such as Rolex and Marimekko, multiple bank and insurance company headquarters and the main local tax office. This street passes the Prime Minister's Office, the Senate Square and the main building of the University of Helsinki as it connects the seaside with one of the biggest roads in Helsinki called Mannerheimintie. The monumental buildings show artistic and technical features that exemplify leading architecture of the time they were constructed. Its oldest part constitutes the eastern end as the alignment stems from the 1640s.[109]

When watching the twins dancing and walking at Aleksanterinkatu, it seems as if they have slowed down. However, when viewing this scene in comparison to the same choreographic stride in Utsjoki at the gas station, their pace is the same. Whereas in the snow the open sky and sun bright atmosphere is emphasised by long-stretched tones of the bass clarinet, shorter tones mixed with the tram sounds accompany the walk on Aleksanterinkatu. This makes the same choreography in Helsinki seem slower and mellow. In Helsinki, we see a tram and pedestrians passing in the background. Their pace is faster than the twins' movements as well. The girls are filmed from the worm's point of view which creates emphasis on the architecture. The buildings are reaching high while connected through electricity cables, forming a visually closed environment around the dancers. Whereas we could hear the crunching footsteps on the icy snow in the arctic landscape, they are now overshadowed by the urban noises. Using the same choreographic elements, these two scenes create a juxtaposition of the arctic landscape and the urban cityscape in the features of visual, audio and tempo.

Interviewee A experiences this contrast in the scenography. "It is challenging to narrate something without words. You succeed when you speak with and through emotions and feelings. Nature is always like that." In juxtaposition to the expressive arctic landscapes, interviewee A describes the dancers' arrival at Aleksanterinkatu in the city center of Helsinki as cold. Although interviewee A sees

[109] "Helsinki: Uusimaa: Helsingin Aleksanterinkatu" 2009.

the parliament as amazing, it nevertheless is cold to them. Interviewee B agrees: When thinking of Helsinki, a mixed pile of streets and houses come to mind as well as the railway station. Having moved away from Sápmi eleven years ago interviewee B states: “I would like to move back home.” Interviewee B reminisces about the nature of the North which is not the same as the nature in Helsinki. “Well, there is nature here. But not the kind of nature that I know how to be in.”, interviewee B describes. Having lived their whole life next to a river, they do not feel the same togetherness with the sea. The sea can be intimidating. The river does not scare interviewee B. Neither does a walk in the home forest of the North. Yet, in the Helsinki metropolitan area interviewee B fears getting lost, similarly to the trouble of orientating in the city center. Interviewee B describes how they miss reference points from a further distance: There is no fell or arctic hill and you cannot see the houses behind other buildings in order to navigate. Interviewee B talks further about home in the North stating not even being able to draw the landscape of what they call home now. “Here, home is merely the house. But home there is much more than a house. It is the river and it is the land and it is the two birches right there. Home is very different.”

The audio of what sounds like pig imitations leads into the next location which is the top of the stairs at the Finnish parliament house. While striding forwards, the dancers pause dynamically, slowing down their movements to create the illusion of a pose. In many of these dynamic poses, they stand up on their toes, raising their arms as if trying to reach as high as the granite columns. After circling the columns, they pass in front of the stuffed reindeer. It seems to be waiting for admission at the front door of the parliament house.

Next, the dancers are in their *gákti* dancing freely and wildly on the stairs in front of the Finnish parliament house. The dynamic filming of the camera emphasises the movement in this scene in addition to the animal imitation sounds. A dramatic, deep harmonium sound chimes and the girls are back in their ballet costumes. As they spin in front of the parliament, it looks like a music box: When you raise the cover, the ballerina in the box starts to spin. These boxes often need to be wound up mechanically in order for the music to play and the ballerina to dance. Simultaneously, the girls are flapping their wings as we saw them in the beginning of their journey. Thus, this must be the end of their journey. They have arrived. As they kneel down, they rest their head on the floor. The next frame shows shortly the stuffed reindeer again. As the sounds fade out, it remains facing to the left at the lower end of the parliament house.

In this sequence, there are several versions of the Sámi image. It assembles a mixture of outside imposed stereotypes and experienced realities. The reindeer’s stiffness is juxtaposed with the liveliness and elegance of the twins. Both the reindeer and the twin couple are representing the Sámi. Yet, the reindeer is an outdated stereotypical image of the Sámi identity. “It is not a living

reindeer but poor, run-down, worn off by time. The Sámi are often presented in a similar manner: as old memories of the past.", interviewee C describes this image of the Sámi as dusty and outdated. The reindeer in front of the parliament is a dead animal in a dead landscape. Interviewee C notes: "We are still here and we are not dead, dusty reindeer." Many might still think of the Sámi as wearing only their *gákti* and herding reindeer all year long. Needless to say, the contemporary Sámi identity is more complex. In former times, it was simpler to define who is a Sámi. Earlier, there was not such a need to think about what the Sámi identity means. "Nowadays", interviewee C narrates, "probably every Sámi has had to reflect on this in one way or another." At least this is the case for the ones who live outside of Sápmi and are not in constant interaction with other Sámi. Interviewee C talks about how not every member of their family has searched for their Sámi identity like interviewee C has. Being with their own family does not give the experience of coming into contact with Sámi people. However, the Sámi culture has had an impact through everyday life such as the Sámi costumes and shoes, eating reindeer meat and going fishing with the grandparents. The traditional Sámi way of living has been present in interviewee C's life. Nonetheless, interviewee C describes how they miss being part of the strong family and Sámi community which they experience as an extremely active one. "I would like to be there and be part of the Inari Sámi community which is growing and reviving constantly – and the language is being recovered as well." Although having studied a Sámi language, at that time it was not possible to learn the language of interviewee C's family. Many Sámi languages are only now being reactivated and taught again. Interviewee C is only one of many who has never learned their Sámi mother tongue. Often Sámi, who grow up outside of the community alike interviewee C, search for their roots. In this process language plays a crucial part.

When being asked to define the Sámi identity, almost all Sámi refer to the language as important element, albeit belonging to the generations that have lost their mother tongue. Other components are the Sámi handicrafts, traditional diet and music. A close togetherness with nature and traditional Sámi livelihood are considered self-explanatorily as Sámi. Besides reindeer traditions, the Sámi identity is experienced as distinct from the Finnish mainland culture through a stronger connection and awareness to their extended family. This community can also be seen in the *gákti*: A Sámi can recognise the family roots and home region by looking at the traditional costumes. Genetics do not define Sámi identity. Instead, one is considered to be growing into one's Sámi identity: the Sámi way of structuring the world, Sámi values and norms and becoming part of the Sámi community. The lived connection to the Sámi culture is understood as crucial. Yet, returning to the issue of language, the first part of the law of the Sámi parliament defining the Sámi identity is that one parent or grandparent must have learned a Sámi language as first language.[110]

[110] Laki Saamelaiskäräjistä n.d.

The Sámi culture has a strong emphasis on togetherness with nature as well as on traditional handicraft. Interviewee A elaborates on the forms of nature which are carved out of wood when working with it. Interviewee A explains how Sámi culture is displayed by the ballet girls: “We have always welcomed new influences by mixing them with our own. Here, the two girls are dancing ballet. There are numerous influences and yet, it is a Sámi short film – even through they are dancing ballet.” Interviewee A points out how in this short film ballet becomes part of the Sámi culture and not the other way around. Helander uses the method and universal language of ballet in order to tell a story about the Sámi. Interviewee A is apparently proud when talking about the Sámi as innovative people who take influences to create their own mixture.

The composition of this sequence consists of three different movement styles: ballet, free improvisation and stillness. The wild and free dance scene, in which the twins are wearing their *gákti*, might cater to stereotypes in a similar way as the stuffed, worn-out reindeer. Drawing from the previous remarks about contemporary Sámi culture as a mixture of influences and representing the Sámi despite the use of art forms adopted from other cultures, the movements in this sequence show a cross-section of the images there are about the Sámi. In all three interviews, the knowledge gap about the Sámi in the population of the Finnish mainland was discussed and declared. The contrast between stiffness, elegant yet strict ballet and free movement might also represent the relationship of the mainland population with the Sámi: Through longstanding stereotypes, some might not be willing to give up on their outdated image of the Sámi, thinking of them as extinct tribe that no longer is alive. Others might still see the Sámi through touristic marketing views as wild and free people living in the North. In this line, the ballerinas might represent a contemporary view on the Sámi identity embracing both new influences and old traditions. The ballet dance and costume is what we can see, yet a cultural identity such as language, togetherness with nature and a strong community are not necessarily visible to the eye.

The switch is dramatic when the scene cuts from the free movements in *gákti* to the ballerinas turning like in a music-box. The toy ballerinas in a music-box are often mechanically wound up by turning a lever in order to initiate dance when opening the cover. This association suggests that the spinning ballerinas in front of the parliament are also controlled by an outside force. With the political and cultural past and present discourses, this scene can be seen as another experiential hint at the colonialist history of the Sámi. Their right to execute traditions and culture is given, yet the practicalities are made difficult as in the example of fishing authorisations demonstrates. This could be seen as still regulating the movement of the Sámi in an indirect way like the mechanism in a music-box.

Endless journey

The last scene shows the dancers repeating the wing-flapping movement as they spin on the spot. They keep on turning as the camera retreats and the image fades to black. The movements carry on during the fade-out which suggests an open end to the story. The conclusion of the film is a continuation. “The ending is a bit distressing as they remain in the churn. That is not a solution to anything.”, interviewee B worries. Seeing the dancers keep on spinning reminds interviewee B of a limbo without the possibility to exit. In turn, interviewee A suggests the circulation of the narrative. Like migratory birds, interviewee A interprets the dancers to be returning to the North leaving the stuffed reindeer at the steps of the parliament house. The choreography is not only taking place in each scene and in each dancer’s bodily movements. There is also this zoomed-out choreography which moves the dancers through the land of Finland from North to South and back.

5.1.2. Swans in lakes and birds in the earth

Returning from this broader perspective back to the dancers’ movements, this chapter takes a closer look at the ballet associations and connotations in the choreography of *Birds in the Earth*. Even without Helander’s statement about the initial idea of two Indigenous girls dancing the *Dying Swan* choreography in front of the Finnish parliament,[111] most probably associate ballet costumes with the well-known ballet *Swan Lake.* It is understood to be the most famous one in the world.[112] Contemporary variations and interpretations also encompass movies such as *Black Swan* from 2010, which portrayed psychological struggles of an aspiring ballerina.[113] Even though the swan ballet has only been the initial beginning for creating *Birds in the Earth*, there are some intriguing ideas coming to mind when connecting the short film to the ballet piece. Both the choreographies and the narratives deriving from the embodied meaning of the classical ballet and the short film are compared.

First, a common misconception needs to be clarified. Although often mixed up, *Swan Lake* and *The Dying Swan* are in fact distinct pieces. In the interview, Helander speaks of *The Dying Swan* choreography, yet it is often understood as part of *Swan Lake*. Therefore, a closer look at both pieces can be fruitful.

[111] Sundance Institute 2019.
[112] “Swan Lake” n.d.
[113] “Black Swan (2010)” n.d.

Swan Lake

Swan Lake is a ballet in four acts which premiered in 1877 in Moscow. The plot tells the tragic story of a princess being kept in the form of a swan by an evil magician. She can only regain her human form through a man swearing true love for her. The narrative includes the magician's daughter trying to appear as the princess in order to trick the prince in choosing her as wife instead of the swan princess. The two roles of the real and fake princess are often performed by the same ballerina. There are several different versions for the ending of *Swan Lake*: In one version, the spell is broken. In another, the prince and the princess both commit suicide. More recent interpretations of the piece have included socio-political discourses by switching out gender roles or presenting the magician as fascist dictator.[114]

Before inspecting choreographic correlations between *Swan Lake* and *Birds in the Earth*, we experiment with the idea of translating the *Swan Lake* narrative onto Helander's short film. In both pieces, the main ballerina is having a double role. In *Birds in the Earth*, it is even a twin double role. Whereas *Swan Lake*'s ballerina is portraying a princess and the magician's daughter, two characters of the story, having twins in *Birds in the Earth,* seems to diminish the performers' individual identities. They seem to form a unity which enables us to see them jointly representing something impersonal. Whereas *Swan Lake* presents itself as a romantic story, *Birds in the Earth* seems to be an abstract allegory.

In the story of *Swan Lake*, the magician is using his power to control the form of the princess. Similarly in Helander's short film, the twin dancers change their character and costumes. Yet, there are scenes, such as throwing the lassos and catching objects in the snow, where their characters, costumes and movement qualities intertwine: While being in their ballet costumes, they are not dancing. In another scene, as they freely dance in their *gáktis* in front of the parliament house, it is almost the other way around. Although not in ballet costumes, the twins are dancing, however, the movement quality differs crucially from classical ballet. As there are two dancers in *Birds in the Earth*, one option would have been to show both characters simultaneously: one twin in the ballet costume and the other in the *gákti*. Choosing to have them identical throughout the whole film creates the sense of them belonging together instead of being opposed in. Different to *Swan Lake*, the characters represented by the dancers in ballet costumes and *gákti* are not opposing to each other. Maybe they are not distinct people or entities. They are actually intertwined through their body which stays the same whichever costume they are wearing. These scenes with interconnections between the

[114] Craine and Mackrell 2010.

characters portray a more realistic complexity and multi-layeredness than in the tale of *Swan Lake*. Maybe the twins are portraying a metaphor for the contemporary Sámi identity.

Returning to the characters of *Swan Lake*, there is the evil magician which forces the princess to stay in its swan form. There is no obvious personification of the magician in *Birds in the Earth.* Yet, when identifying the magician's role as an abstract force, which keeps the protagonist(s) in an unnatural form, the strict conventions of ballet dance can be seen as its illustration. Each tiny movement and tension in the muscles, the direction of the gaze and the costumes of the dancers are carefully choreographed in the rules of ballet. It stretches and bends the human body into shapes and motions which require longstanding repetition and training.

Stretching and bending or in other words adapting to an outside system is what the Sámi have been forced to experience for decades. After the land of Sápmi was divided into ownership of the states of Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia, also the Sámi individuals were pressured into the model of majority cultures. In the chapter *Kaukana kotoa* (in English: 'Far away from home', own translation), Ranta and Kanninen describe how many Sámi children were forced to leave their homes to live in school dormitories between the 1950s and 1970s. When school became an obligation and many Sámi could not commute to school and back from their homes due to the far distance, they were put into dormitories. Both in dormitories and the schools, the required language was Finnish, although many Sámi children only spoke their mother tongue at arrival. School books were teaching about the "yellow-faced Lapps" which the Sámi were often referred to at that time and how these were living in poverty and were going to die from extinction. Needless to say, Sámi children were not only excluded by the language barrier but many experienced also traumatic harassment throughout their school years. As leaving for home was not an option and the children were drilled to adapt to the Finnish language and customs, their Sámi mother tongue was often unlearned and forgotten, not to mention the forced conversion of their view on their own culture.[115]

Even much earlier, the old Sámi believes and inherent rituals and objects were driven out of the Sámi communities. One example is the Sámi drum which was used by the spiritual leader *noaidi* for trances to let their spirit travel to different worlds as well as healing purposes. By others than the *noaidi*, the Sámi drum was broadly used for fortune-telling and prediction mostly in a very practical manner. Each family used to have their own drum. However, christianity arrived in Sápmi already in the 11th century when churches were built on the shores of the Gulf of Bothnia and the Arctic Ocean.[116] The final conversion was enforced in 1686 when the church law was changed and the Sámi were obliged to leave their spiritual beliefs and assimilate the Lutheran sacraments. Sámi drums were destroyed

[115] Ranta and Kanninen 2019, 143–171.
[116] Ranta and Kanninen 2019, 93.

although some Sámi tried to hide them. Spiritual leaders were taken to court, yet in the Norwegian Finnmark 91 alive *noaidis* were burned during the 17th century. One fifth of them were Sámi.[117] After this near extinction of the Sámi drum, Elli Maaret Helander is nowadays trying to revive this lost tradition. Since 1997, she has been teaching the art of creating drums and thereby restoring a part of the Sámi culture.[118]

Returning to comparing the narratives of *Swan Lake* to an interpretation of *Birds in the Earth*, these experienced oppressions of adapting to the Finnish mainland could compare to the magician of *Swan Lake.* Both compel the protagonists to change their shape. In *Swan Lake*, the love of a prince can save the princess. Pursuing the short film as illustration of the Sámi being forced into the Finnish form and culture, one could compare the freeing love of the prince to decolonisation and decentralisation. A recent concrete form of this effort is taken by the truth and reconciliation commission. It is a practice which has been started in 2017 to function as joint reassessment of both current and future Sámi political and cultural identity.[119] The last scene of *Birds in the Earth* shows the two dancers spinning in a churn which is the place where the reindeer are separated each year. The dancers' hands move in the motion of wings while the rotating camera zooms out showing the churn from above. The end to this decolonisation and decentralisation process is thus far from finished yet.

The Dying Swan

The solo piece *The Dying Swan* is often thought to be one of the ending scenes of the *Swan Lake* ballet as the princess swan dies in some variations.[120] However, in contrast to the four act ballet *Swan Lake*, the solo *The Dying Swan* is a short one act choreography expressing the struggles of a dying bird. This can also be seen as a metaphor for the ephemeral art of dance which only lives during the show. *The Dying Swan* was premiered in 1907 in St. Petersburg thirty years after *Swan Lake*. It was originally choreographed for ballerina Anna Pavlova who became known as the *Immortal Swan* as she kept dancing the solo throughout her life.[121] *The Dying Swan* has since become a symbol which has inspired many paintings and sculptures through the choreography as well as the iconic dancer herself.[122] Pavlova portrays the swan as a proud bird not easily giving into the struggle of dying. When she falls, she rises up again keeping her head high.

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[117] Ranta and Kanninen 2019, 93–95.
[118] Ranta and Kanninen 2019, 95–96.
[119] Ranta and Kanninen 2019, 320.
[120] Anna Pavlova as The Swan 2016.
[121] "Dying Swan" n.d.
[122] Portnova 2019.

The thematic of *The Dying Swan* resonates with concerns of the Indigenous people. Similarly to the dying swan, the Sámi are known to actively defend their rights as Indigenous people against all odds. Interviewee A explains: "The stories of all Indigenous people are similar. It does not end well. Nature is dying; and this death, what does it mean for the Indigenous people?" Despite this lingering anxiety, the Sámi have not given up like the ballerina in *The Dying Swan* and are reviving their culture. Similar to ballet dance, culture needs to be practiced. Both are experiential and ever-changing with a strong core from embodied tradition.

Intersecting choreographic elements

When drawing parallels between *Birds in the Earth* and the choreographies of *Swan Lake* and *The Dying Swan*, there are multiple similar movements to be found. As *Swan Lake* and *The Dying Swan* are choreographies instead of fixed video material, the movement interpretations of the set patterns differ not only between each dancer, but also between each dance. For a short comparison of movements and their qualities, I am using three performances. For *Swan Lake*, this is a live recording from *The Teatro Degli Arcimboldi* in 2004 with Svetlana Zakharova in the two main roles of the swan princess and the magician's daughter.[123] In case of *The Dying Swan*, the viewed material is an interpretation by the original dancer Anna Pavlova's.[124] In addition, I draw from another variation by Zakharova from 2010.[125] Zakharova's videos had been ideals for the twins from *Birds in the Earth*, while having to practice ballet at home due to the lack of a ballet school in Utsjoki.[126]

The most relevant movement of resemblance in the three choreographies are the fluttering arms (figures 7–9). In combination with their white ballet costumes, this signature movement transforms each of the dancers into a swan. Yet, there are differences in the movement's execution. In comparison with Zakharova, Pavola's version shows more struggle and pain, for example, at 1:50 (figure 14) as she goes down in struggle. Simultaneously, her expressive and often fast movements give her an empowering confidence by not giving into the fight of dying. Zakharova, however, embodies more sorrow and tragedy in her dying swan. Her movements are slow. They even include some positions which seem almost still. She shows this style of movement in both *Swan Lake* and *The Dying Swan*. Zakharova's movement characteristics resemble the twins' dance more than Pavlova's. There is the obvious time gap which has generally formed ballet as a style. Yet, as Birit and Katja Haarla have followed Zakharova's videos, the resemblance seems more specific.

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[123] Teatro Degli Arcimboldi 2004.
[124] Anna Pavlova as The Swan 2016.
[125] The Dying Swan 2010.
[126] Sinervo 2017.

Both *Swan Lake* and *The Dying Swan* have some sequences which also appear in *Birds in the Earth*. For example when the swans kneel down and bow to the front with their hands crossed (figures 10–15). In *Swan Lake*, this scene repeats in different acts. At 1:53:27 (figure 11), some of the swan dancers bow in this position after the magician reveals the prince's betrayal towards the princess. He had been tricked in order to propose to the magician's daughter who pretended to be the beloved princess. At 2:01:51 (figure 12), prince and princess meet again after this betrayal. In both *The Dying Swan* choreographies this pose is the ending of the performance thus the death of the swan.

The following two series show stills with similar poses and movements in *Birds in the Earth* and *Swan Lake* (figures 16–20 and 21–23) The first scenes show resembling movements. As they are performed in a slow pace, they appear like poses although the dancers do not stop fully (figures 16–20). Chest stretched to the front and opening arms widely to the sides and back, the dancers appear in a vulnerable and open position. They present themselves to the spectator. In both choreographies, the protagonists draw the spectator's awareness and create tension for the following scenes. It seems as if the dancers are presenting themselves and simultaneously being open to what will come. In *Birds in the Earth*, they breath in the moment connecting themselves with the crippled birch trees and later with the sun rays in front of the parliament house.

The second series (figures 21–23) of stills shows the twins and Zakharova crossing their hands in front of their bodies. In *Swan Lake*, this movement is part of a longer sequence. The twins' version can be seen to enlarge it into a meaningful beginning and ending of their travel. The dancers perform this movement before starting to fly and when they land in front of the Finnish parliament. It frames the whole choreography even though it does neither mean the start nor the end of the short film.

After landing and kneeling down in front of the parliament house, the dancers in *Birds in the Earth* start to spin. This movement is similar to Zakharova's in *Swan Lake* after encountering the prince for the first time. It seems as if the swan princess tries to get distance between herself and the prince, as if she is trying to gain height by spiralling upwards. It might also emphasise the flying of the *Birds in the Earth* back to the North. The swans begin to spin in front of the parliament house and continue when being back in Sápmi.

Both narratives and choreographic movements of the traditional ballet *Swan Lake* and the solo *The Dying Swan* seem to have inspired the making of *Birds in the Earth*. Generally, portraying political content can easily come across as provocative and thereby split the public by their opinions. *Birds in the Earth* uses humour and ballet in order to make these topics more approachable. As spectator, you can also choose to focus only the layer of graceful dance in combination with the fascinating

environment. Nevertheless, there is hidden meaning to be discovered. By using traditional ballet as storytelling method, possible thematic tension is being soothed. The fragile looking yet clearly strong dance of ballet adds history and meaning to the short film by quoting movements from two of the most famous ballet pieces. Additionally, the aesthetic frame of two white swan dancers create a beautiful contrast with the wild nature surrounding them. This comparison evokes tension which keeps the spectator's attention throughout the film even without knowing political or historical background information on neither ballet nor the Sámi.

5.1.3. Sámi ways of storytelling

The choreography in *Birds in the Earth* is informed and supported by its soundscape. It combines instrumental minimalistic music with the traditional Sámi music called *joik* which can include animal mimicry. In some scenes, there are added sound effects of the dancers and their surroundings to emphasise the content of the scenes. Examples are footsteps on icy snow and the sound of lassos flying through the air. These sound effects draw the spectator into the displayed world. By adding the audio dimension, the scenes come closer. We are listening to the crunching footsteps on the snow from nearby.

Apart from the dance choreography and sound design, the music in *Birds in the Earth* is a main part of the storytelling. It contributes to each scene by laying a ground atmosphere from which to understand the visual features. For example, the sound of a harmonium reminds of gloomy foreshadowing. About the scene in which the dancers play the harmonium amidst the snow, interviewee A points out: "The music of the synthesiser [earlier referred to as "harmonium"] tells of a technological or industrial catastrophe." The audio and visual compose references with our prior knowledge, which raises the association with a technological or industrial catastrophe in interviewee A.

The music of *Birds in the Earth* has been released prior to the short film by Wimme&Rinne and RinneRadio on the albums "StaRRk" (2012) and "Human" (2017).[127] RinneRadio is a project by Tapani Rinne who is an experimental musician and composer. Together with Sámi *joik* artist Wimme Saari, they form the duo Wimme&Rinne. The projects by Saari and Rinne combine traditional Sámi music with modern technologies such as the loop station. In live performances, they often layer instrumental and imitated animal sounds with singing and humming voices.[128]

[127] Rinne and Saari, n.d.; Rinne, n.d.
[128] See Genelec Music Channel 2017.

As the songs were not specifically composed for the short film, we can find a layering of meanings. For example, the closing song “Elle” was originally written in memory of Saari’s sister who had passed away.[129] In *Birds in the Earth*, the camera is slowly moving further away and leaving the dancers spinning in the churn. Even without knowing about the initial content of the song, the music at the end of the short film can easily leave us with a mournful feeling.

In *Birds in the Earth*, you cannot only hear the soundscape, you can also feel it in your body. The deep bass clarinet, the nearby breath of the musicians and the dancers’ crunching steps on the icy snow draw the spectator into their world. The short film seems to come alive. Rinne’s bass clarinet is one of the central instruments. It transports the spectators through the scenes by its soothing melodious sound. We often hear the breath of the bass player which roots the digital artwork through the audio presence of the human body. The calm rhythm of breath and bass clarinet invites the spectators unconsciously to join the pace of the music. This calm bodily state is also reflected in many of the visual images.

Audio *joik*

In addition to the bass clarinet, another main instrument in the music of *Birds in the Earth* is the human voice. Elle Sofe Henriksen, Aili Ikonen, Stina Koistinen and Saari perform the Sámi music *joik*. Traditionally, a *joik* is composed without instruments and recalls the memory of a place, animal or person.[130] A *joik* is not sung *about* someone or something but they are *being joiked*. Chanted words are repeated and complemented with syllables such as “lul-la”, “lui-lu” and “nu”. The repetition and addition of syllables frees the melody, content and rhythm from being restricted to a grammatically correct text. A *joik* is an attempt to capture the essence of a person or place as precisely as possible. This means covering both positive and negative aspects. The *joik* is a Sámi storytelling tradition. For centuries it has shaped the Sámi languages and way of thinking and therefore empowered the sense of family and belonging together.[131] Interviewee B tells about their family’s *joikers*: “My cousin often sings a joik. If something comes to his mind, a joik will be sung of it. And my father was chanting as well.”

Depending on the region, a *joik* sounds different and has different terms. In Northern Sámi culture, children have been welcomed into the community by receiving their own *joik*. However, you may not perform your own *joik*. This shows welcoming and acceptance of the child in the community. Besides

[129] Perkkiö 2017.
[130] Järvinen 2014.
[131] Järvinen 2014.

maintaining social and moral values, a *joik* is also thought to be a mediator between the worlds. As long as someone or something is being *joiked*, they are believed to be alive.[132] As an unbroken unity, a *joik* does not have a beginning nor an end.[133] Sámi artist Nils-Aslak Valkeapää has played an important role in documenting and sharing knowledge about the Sámi culture and tradition. Already in the 1970s, he talked about a "new joik" combining the human voice with instruments. We can already see a harmonium similar to the one in *Birds in the Earth* in the documentary framed by the article *Joiku ei tarvitse sanoja* (in English: 'A joik does not need words', own translation).[134] Interviewee B agrees when describing words as less important than the melody. According to interviewee B, the melody makes you recognise if the *joik* is cheerful, mournful or easygoing, simply speaking about life. Interviewee B interprets the *joik* in *Birds in the Earth*: "As if they were *joiking* sad things. Or maybe not sad things but rather *joiking* things in a sad or wistful way."

Dance and film *joik*

In *Birds in the Earth*, the choreography is what carries the narratives throughout the short film. Only in some scenes we can hear a *joik* in the background. Whereas the term *joik* traditionally refers to music, it may be enhanced with choreographic features such as gestures, expressions and movements. These are more common when *joiking* in a social situation. A *joik* is not necessarily created for someone to listen, yet, *Birds in the Earth* is made for an audience, thus said social situations.

A *joik* often includes allegories which refer to nature and animals, for example willow grouses. As discussed previously, the dancers in the short film were seen either as willow grouses or swans by all interviewees. For example, interviewee A pointed out the dancers' walking rhythm on the snow resembling willow grouses. In a *joik*, humans can be assimilated with animals. This metaphoric language is used for conveying personality traits of the *joik*'s subject. Whether we see the dancers in connection with character traits of a swan or a willow grouse, both illuminate different aspects of the previously discusses Sámi discourses and history. Adapting choreographic elements in a *joik* manner to describe the essence of these topics translates the ballet dance into the Sámi language. This emphasises the effect. Interviewee A compares the dance choreography to *joik*: "It almost seems as if they are having a certain *joik* power through their dance. It is a descriptive dance."

[132] Ranta and Kanninen 2019, 256.
[133] Joikuja Lapin maisemissa 1977.
[134] Fogelholm 2013.

Following the idea of understanding dance in this context as *joik* expands the idea of the traditional Sámi music. Comparing a dance *joik* to a traditional sung *joik*, there are several analogies to be found. Both music and dance are means of storytelling employed by contemporary Sámi and both disciplines are known for their metaphoric language. Music and dance recall memories and keep associations alive. Whereas a sung *joik* can encompass added syllables to freely communicate, ballet dance can also apply movements to make their narratives more precise. For example, the dancers do not simply put one foot in front of the other when crossing the land. They also adjust to a specific pace and emphasise their dance *joik* with hand movements, poses and jumps.

Additionally and like many Sámi traditions, *joik* has been passed on without written words. Similarly, ballet has been taught orally and through embodied knowledge. When the dancers Birit and Katja Haarla started to learn ballet, words were not the teaching method. In an interview, the Haarla twins describe their ballet lessons in Sápmi: As their teacher was not fluent in Sámi, movement became their shared language.[135]

Against the stereotypes, the Sámi are developing their own culture further which means including influences from other cultures as well. Interviewee A points out that integrating the universal language of ballet into the Sámi storytelling methods shows the innovative Sámi character. Zooming out another step, the same holds true for filmmaking as discussed in the chapter concerning Indigenous filmmaking. The short film *Birds in the Earth* and its dance *joik* show translated versions of the storytelling traditions into contemporary technologies and practices.

5.2. Costumes

Costumes can be seen as codes, which tell us about the identity of the person wearing them. In *Birds in the Earth*, there are two main costumes: the traditional Sámi costume called *gákti* and the ballet costume. In the very beginning of the short film, the main protagonists are introduced in a *gákti*. The ballet dress is only the second costume they are wearing. Showing the girls firstly in their *gákti* frames our understanding of the dancers as foremost Sámi and as ballerinas only as secondary characters. In specific key scenes of the short film, the two appearances intertwine when elements of the Sámi culture are embedded into the ballet costume.

[135] Sinervo 2017.

5.2.1. *Gákti* expressing community

The *gákti* is traditionally personalised for one individual community member. In contrast to the appropriating advertisement using generalised variations of the Sámi costumes for stereotyping arctic tourism, as seen in the stand-in photo props at the Karhutupa, the original *gákti* highlights a person's home and ancestry. The patterns, colours and their arrangement tells another Sámi exactly which kin they belong to. One could say that wearing your *gákti* is like wearing a piece of homeland and family around your body.

Regulating the *gákti* essentially differs from the national or regional costumes of the Finnish mainland. Whereas the Finnish regional costumes' design is defined by a council, the *gákti* has a long-standing oral and embodied collective tradition. It is formed by the combination of the material, concrete costume and its immaterial customs and folklore. The Finnish costumes represent national romanticism and despite mostly sticking to their home region's design, one may choose freely which design to wear. Although the various Sámi costume styles are often divided according to region and language, the main factor is the family. As the Sámi live across borders, the distribution of the styles of *gákti* is also not regulated by national borders. Which design to wear is not a choice but it is determined by belonging to a kin. As the *gákti* was an everyday costume, the design was mainly influenced by the concept of beauty in the Sámi culture, as well as the environment, natural conditions and the work environment. In juxtaposition to the ballet costume, the *gákti* is not made for performance.

A Sámi does not change their *gákti* when moving to a different place. When switching a *gákti,* it constitutes honouring a different kin, for example, when one gets married. When a child's parents belong to different kins, the child may choose which *gákti* to wear. Most adults adhere to one type of *gákti* and the styles may not be combined: The whole costume has to be worn in the same style. Interviewee B explains that mostly, the costumes are made by a family member who holds the skill of traditional handicraft. When wearing a *gákti*, you represent yourself, your kin, region and people. It means honouring Sáminess as well as the occasion and its organisers.[136]

All three interviewees report a direct connection with Sámi handicraft in their family. In the methodology chapter, I mentioned an item asked to be brought by the interviewee, which would represent or illustrate their Sámi identity. Taking into consideration that one interviewee brought two items and one could not bring a physical item, they had all chosen at least one handicraft item. The objects were: a *guksi* which is a traditional Sámi crafted cup carved from a birch burl according to its year rings made by the interviewee's father, a brand new traditional silver jewellery bought

[136] Aikio 2018. For visual information, see Tammela and Rasmus 2020.

specifically for a sibling's wedding from Kautokeino and a self-woven traditional Inari Sámi belt that the interviewee had personalised with switching out the colour of the base threads. These items and their stories illustrate once again how the Sámi identity is strongly connected with family and traditional handicrafts.

Interviewee C has studied Sámi textile crafts and during our conversations talks about the different ways of tying scarves for the *gákti*. There are different patterns and trends how loose or densely the knots are bound. Interviewee B and C narrate about how they discreetly wear parts of their *gákti* in everyday life. For special occasions, both have worn Sámi jewellery. Interviewee C says they wore moderate pieces of their *gákti* which they would probably not have done in the same way in the North: wearing a summer jacket during the winter as its colours are more discreet in black and red. In their everyday life, interviewee B often wears Sámi necklaces and ear jewellery.

Interviewee B tells about how their Finnish work colleagues are shy to ask about the jewellery. "A colleague […] said that they had thought about it in the morning – they had heard on the radio that it is Sámi National day. And they said that they had looked at my ear jewellery – I had put these kind of *laukkas* jewellery – but my colleague did not dare to ask about them." Interviewee B experiences this as a pity and wonders why it is so difficult to ask about these things as we are already living in the 2020s. Interviewee B exemplifies that they can also ask a Finnish person where they got their jewellery from, yet remaining with the question of why this is not usual the other way around as well. Interviewee B is worried that people are becoming more and more careful in the contact with the Sámi. Interviewee B assumes that this is due to the search for Sámi identity which is happening in the North nowadays. While interviewee B is concerned about the image of the Sámi portrayed on the news, they understand how some are becoming maybe even overly cautious or scared of approaching the Sámi.

In *Birds in the Earth*, the *gákti* introduces the girls in the very beginning of the short film. The dancers are Sámi themselves and they are wearing the Utsjoki *gákti*.[137] Although originally made for everyday life, the *gákti* is nowadays mostly worn for special events or days. During the short film, the twins are mostly wearing the ballet costume. There are only three scenes in which they have on their traditional costumes: the introduction of their characters in the beginning of the film while covering the "land-owned" part of the signpost with scarves and finally, the wild dance in front of the parliament. In these three occasions, the *gákti* emphasises the girls' representation of the Sámi or more specifically the togetherness of the individual persons with their kin, their home region and their people.

[137] See "Utsjoensaamelaisen Puku" n.d.

Accordingly, we can understand the girls in the beginning introducing the spectator to the narrative in the name of the Sámi and not as individuals. Whereas we might refer to uniformity in the context of the ballet costumes, it is rather togetherness and the sense of community that is being shown when wearing the *gákti*. The opening scene shows the two girls standing as a unity. Together, they are looking across the arctic fells. Connected, they are holding hands as they face the spectator. Their kinship shows through this gesture and the identical *gáktis.* Only the scarves' colours and motives are unlike which reminds shortly of their individual identities.

The next scene, in which the girls appear in their *gákti* again, shows them at the signpost. The sequence consists of short cuts between the girls in *gákti* with their white scarves and in ballet costumes with similar red scarves. In an educational video produced by the Sámi Education Institute, the protagonist tells about her experience of wearing her *gákti*: "When I wear my *gákti*, that is when I am myself."[138] She feels safe and beautiful in the *gákti* and like she is able to do anything. This suggests that the dancers might also be representing themselves first and foremost when wearing the *gákti.* In the scene at the signpost, the ballet girls seem to struggle with throwing the red scarves onto the sign. This is where the *gákti* comes in and seems to give them the necessary strength and confidence for this protest action.

When we see the dancers wearing their *gákti* again in front of the Finnish parliament house, they do not have their scarves anymore. They were probably left at the signpost. The *gákti* is a common wardrobe for gatherings of the Sámi parliament or for representing the Sámi in other political contexts. With the Finnish parliament house symbolising the political power of the Finnish state, the *gákti* is seen with political connotations as well. The scene opens with two birds circling each other in the sky above the parliament. As the camera shifts down, the wild movement is carried on by the dancers. By wearing the *gákti*, the twins are representing not only themselves. They bring along their contemporaries as well as past ancestry, homeland and animal kingdom.

Throughout the journey of the dancers from North to South, they mostly wear the ballet costume. Only in the scenes, where they portray particular strength and willpower, they employ the *gákti* to underline their actions. There is only one additional sequence in which the *gákti* seems to make an appearance: at the Karhutupa in the form of a varied appropriation illustrating the Sámi as a stand-in photo prop. As interviewee A had already mentioned, the Karhutupa has a long tradition of malpractice and appropriation of the Sámi handicraft. The painted costumes might seem like a Sámi costume to someone who is not familiar with the traditions. Yet, it is as unreal as the whole sign portraying something that actually does not exist.

[138] Saamelaisalueen koulutuskeskus and Lappalainen 2008.

5.2.2. Ballet composing uniformity

During the majority of the short film, the twins are wearing the classic white ballet outfit with tights, ballet skirt and pointe shoes. The costume includes a tight hair bun which fixes the dancers' long hair into place. The ballet costume creates strange juxtapositions with the girls' surroundings such as the arctic forest and snowy landscapes as well as the village street next to the gas station. Through wearing the ballet costumes, the girls seem to portray a different sphere than the everyday life seen in the images surrounding them.

The ballet costume is designed for performances or in other words, for being seen and observed. Additionally, the ballet shoes support the dancer's movements allowing them to get on their tip toes. The skirt is stiff and creates a juxtaposed line to the dancers moving body. The dancer's muscles are clearly visible in this costume and even when performing in a big theatre, the dancer's movement can be followed thanks to the bright white costume.

The ballet costume also produces conformity and uniformity which conceals a dancer's individual identity. This creates a strong contrast with the personalised *gákti*, whose design expresses the owner's identity. When wearing a ballet costume, the character's role becomes their new identity. Ballet dancers are often required to be of a certain height in order for the whole performance to look balanced. In larger ballet pieces, such as *Swan Lake*, there are numerous scenes with multiple dancers forming a unity of identically looking individuals. The ballet costume makes the dancer blend into the mass becoming a single component of a bigger picture.

In *Birds in the Earth*, the ballet costume brings not only the association of *Swan Lake* and big ballet theatre productions. The ballerina outfit amidst the arctic nature in actions of throwing colourful lassos to catch everyday objects breaks the tension of a mere beautiful dance film or political activism. The juxtaposition of contexts and elements makes the short film intriguing as it awakes the question of why there are two ballerinas dancing in an environment so unusual and probably also unpractical for a ballet performance.

By alternating between ballet and traditional Sámi costumes, Helander prevents the spectators from staying outside of the narrative. Mixing cultural elements brings the film closer to non-Sámi spectators. If the whole choreography had been danced in *gákti*, the atmosphere would be more serious and heavy. The ballet costumes spread the narratives into a more general discussion including non-Sámi associations into the understanding of the short film.

Whereas the Sámi traditional costumes are personal and sewn specifically for an individual, the ballet costume constitutes uniformity. Wearing a ballet costume, the dancer in *Birds in the Earth* is not

necessarily speaking from an individual perspective. The fact that the dancers are identical twins continues and enlarges this generality of their appearance. In this way, the narratives of the film are less probable to be predetermined as a private story of an individual. The conformity of the girls' appearance creates a unity, which represents an even larger group of people, the entirety of their concrete experiences as well as more abstract discourses.

5.2.3. Intersecting appearances

There are two scenes in *Birds in the Earth*, where the ballerina costume is modified with elements from the traditional Sámi costume or livelihood. In these sequences, the dancers pause from their ballet movements.

The dancers break the movement character of a ballerina for the first time, when they are equipped with the red and yellow ropes. This kind of lasso called *suohpan* in North Sámi is traditionally used in reindeer herding to catch reindeer and marks a symbol of the reindeer herder.[139] For example, they are used in the annual event in which reindeer are separated and their ears receive marks according to the owners. In *Birds in the Earth*, we see these lassos additionally in the location of the Karhutupa where the stuffed reindeer and bear in the background have a *suohpan* around their necks.

Amidst the white snow landscape, the girls are throwing their colourful lassos. The yellow and red lines cut through the air and catch everyday objects. After reeling in these items, the lassos are hanging in a rolled up, tidy manner diagonally across the upper body of the girls. This makes the girls look more tough and hands-on than with the mere ballet costumes. As they are about to press down the harmonium keys, they look like gathering their strength and still being ready for action. Maybe being armed with the *suohpan*, an item from home, gives them strength and confidence to move on amidst all the contemporary household clutter.

The second scene, where a traditional Sámi item intersects with the ballet costume, is at the previously discussed signpost. Whereas the whole costumes switch quickly, the ballet costumes are also joined with red Sámi scarves. "Did you notice the colour of the scarves?", interviewee A asks me during our conversation. My association brings blood from the dark red scarves. "Yes: The state, willow grouses, blood.", interviewee A continues. According to interviewee A, the willow grouses portrayed by the dancers are referring to the state-run hunting regulations. The discussion is similar to the fishing permissions and constitutes a battle between touristic and local customs. In this scene, the ballerinas are throwing the red scarves and the Sámi characters in *gákti* are throwing white

[139] The Reindeer Herders' Association 2015.

scarves onto the signpost. The combination of ballet costumes instead of the *gákti* with the blood red scarves prevents a radicalised association of the Sámi culture with aggression. If the girls in *gákti* had thrown the red scarves onto the signpost, the connotations would have been more radical than with the elegant and unthreatening ballet costumes. The ballet costumes are of a symbolic language world. In theatre and dance, blood is not real. It only shows a constructed narrative. The *gákti* is from the real lived world of the contemporary and past Sámi. The colour of their scarves is white. Although the gesture indicates protest, the colour white suggests a peaceful manner. Interviewee B has a conciliatory attitude towards the landownership discussions. Instead of discussing the past, interviewee B proposes: "We all have to be able to live here harmoniously. On the other hand, I understand that they [*the Sámi*] want to participate in the ruling of the land."

The supplement of non-ballet items breaks the character of a mere ballet performer. This adds absurdity, humour and complexity to the short film. Every time the dancers have a complete or partial costume change, the spectator is reminded that this is not merely about the beauty of the arctic landscape in combination with ballet. Our expectations are interrupted through the sudden costume changes, which feeds into what seems to be one of the motivations behind the short film. It makes us aware of our own stereotypes and expectations. It confronts us in a humorous way with the ambivalence of the contemporary Sámi culture.

5.2.4. Performing animals

Costumes create the character of a film's protagonist. They tell us whom we are watching and through which frame the spectator is supposed to interpret the protagonist's actions. This chapter introduces the Sámi mythology on animal metamorphoses as possible interpretative angle. In this context, we pick up on the possible personages of swan and willow grouse portrayed by the ballerinas.

Animal metamorphoses

The transformation from human to animal and vice versa blurs the body's physical barrier. In the traditional Sámi view of the world, animal metamorphoses are believed to be possible for both the Sámi shaman, also called *noaidi*, and ordinary people. The transformation of ordinary people was believed to always be physical and voluntary, meaning a person would exchange their full physical form, not just the soul. Besides through the help of a *noaidi*, this kind of metamorphoses could also

be initiated through rituals: For example, in order to turn into the form of a bear, one had to thrice circle a tree, which bends north. Whereas an ordinary person could only change their whole physical form, a *noaidi* had a different connection with nature. A *noaidi*'s soul could move freely between the worlds of the animal and the human.[140] Through these metamorphoses, the link between outer appearance and inner identity is perceived as dynamic.

When looking at the costumes and movement qualities in *Birds in the Earth*, the twins seem to go through transformations as well. Applying the idea of animal metamorphoses, we can ask in which scenes or costumes the core soul shows. Throughout the short film there are only a few other living beings to be seen: There is a man at the gas station, mosquitos in the air, people in the shopping street and birds mingling above the parliament house. All of the shown characters are in motion. It might be that all of them are enforcing the journey of the twins.

If the dancers in the short film had shamanistic powers, we can also see them in their surrounding living beings in addition to their human form. Two scenes at the parliament house show the dancers in company with animals thus these might be the most suitable for a comparison.

Instead of cycling a bent tree in order to transform into a bear, the girls are cycling the columns of the parliament building. After these almost ritualistic movements of the two young women, a reindeer suddenly appears in front of the girls. The bull reindeer was understood to be the shaman's alter ego and strongest animal spiritual assistant. The shaman's spirit could take the form of the reindeer. However, when the reindeer died, it meant also the death of the shaman.[141] The associations with this Sámi belief raises the question of whose spirit is trapped in the stuffed reindeer. As previously mentioned, the stuffed reindeer can be seen as a symbol for the out-dated image of the Sámi stereotype. Accordingly, the stuffed reindeer could represent the Sámi people's spirit kept captive in this unlively form.

The following scene evokes a strong contrast with the dead reindeer. Above the Finnish parliament house we see birds circling around each other in the air. If the Sámi spirit has transformed again, this might be the freed version of its identity. As the camera shifts downwards, we watch the girls dancing as wildly as the flying birds. Maybe the free Sámi spirit is now visible again through the twins' bodies or maybe it is the girls' soul which encompasses their people's spirit. It seems as if Sámi human or even animal spirits have taken over not only through replacing the costumes but are also shaking up the rules and borders of the choreography of the dancers.

[140] Pulkkinen n.d.
[141] Pulkkinen n.d.

These scenes play with the distinction between the outside appearance and the inner spirit and between the animal and human world. With the outlines blurred, the short film illustrates the togetherness of human, animals and nature which is one of the core values of the Sámi culture. When talking about these interpretations with the interviewees, they neither endorsed nor negated this perspective in general. However, none of the interviewees initiated the association with animal metamorphoses. This suggests that *noaidi* customs and culture are less present in the contemporary Sámi culture of the three interviewees. Nevertheless, these connotations may arise, when comparing the short film to written sources about the Sámi culture. Even though they might not be a dominant part of the contemporary view of the world, they tell us about earlier beliefs. As these have lead to the present day, their application remains relevant in this context. Either way, the idea of animal metamorphoses shows how embedded the Sámi culture is in their surrounding living environment.

Swans

Although not directly linking the *Birds in the Earth* with shamanism or Sámi mythology, all three interviewees saw birds in the protagonists of the short film. There were two birds the interviewees referred to when speaking about the dancers in ballet costumes: the swan and the willow grouse.

In the famous ballet pieces *Swan Lake* and *The Dying Swan*, the main characters are using the association of being a swan for telling their stories. These connotations are raised by illustrative movements and the swan-like white costumes. The swan also has a symbolic meaning in Finnish culture. For example, the swan of Tuonela is a holy bird in the national epos Kalevala.[142] If someone shoots it, this person will die. Additionally, two whooper swans are familiar from the illustration on the Finnish one euro coins.[143] Before becoming protected, swans were a popularly hunted bird in Finland. Since 1981, the whooper swan has been the national bird of Finland and symbolises the growing value of connecting with nature.[144]

The swan is the biggest migratory bird of the North and is also of great importance to the Sámi. For a certain part of the Sámi, the kolts of Petsamo, the swan has even been understood as a holy bird.

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[142] "Kalevalan kankahilla," n.d.; Suomen taiteen tarina – Akseli Gallen-Kallela: Lemminkäisen äiti, 1897 2017.

[143] "Euro Coins in Pictures - National Sides, €1" n.d.; "Nordic Swan Ecolabel: The Official Ecolabel of the Nordic Countries" n.d.; "Home: The Nordic Council" n.d.
The swan is used as symbol of the connection with nature on the Nordic Ecolabel as well as showing the inter-parliamentary co-operation of the Nordic countries in The Nordic Council's from Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Åland.

[144] Pentikäinen and Pulkkinen 2018, 448–449; Halkka 2019.

Another example can be found in Sámi artist Nils-Aslak Valkeapää's poetic work in which he refers to "joiking swans".[145]

In the traditional Sámi calendar, there are more linkages to this white majestic bird. Time is here understood as cyclic and the traditional Sámi calendar includes thirteen months. The name of each month derives from changes in nature and animals. These happenings induce the rhythm into life.[146] As the arrival of the migratory swans show the beginning of spring, that time of the year is called swan month, *njukčamánnu*. Understanding the dancers as swans reminds Interviewee C of *njukčamánnu*. During our conversation interviewee C wonders whether the short film was shot during the swan month.

Comparing the Sámi calendar with the timeline of the images in the film indicating the seasons, we seem to be following two swans on their annual migration to the South and back. They take us on one of their cyclic travels during the time between autumn and early spring. We see the dancers first surrounded by yellow and red autumn colors, then snow. As the scenes move south, the snow disappears and the sunshine in Helsinki reminds of early spring. As the dancers spin in the churn, it might be late summer, completing the annual circle.

On their way, the Sámi swans are stopping at sceneries which symbolise past and recent topics of the Sámi communities. The weather conditions of the scenes in front of the parliament seem suitable for early spring, around March, which is also when the two swans return to the Sápmi. We see them back in the arctic landscapes as they circle in the churn. As their travels are repetitive for each year, they might have revisited every scene each year which reminds of these discourses' ephemerality.

Willow grouses

Another important bird for the Sámi is the willow grouse. Accordingly to the swan as symbol for Finland, you could see the willow grouse as a symbolic bird for the Sámi. It has been one of the most hunted birds in Sápmi, therefore being an important traditional monetary source for the Sámi. As a symbol it indicates the unity of Sámi and nature.

Instead of the classical ballet reference of the dancers portraying swans, interviewee A connects the white costumes and rhythmic movements of the dancers with this traditional Sámi bird. Both interviewees A and C refer to the seasonal changes in the scenery. During this annual temperature

[145] See Valkeapää 1992.
[146] Porsanger B n.d.

drop, the willow grouse's feathers turn from brown to white for the winter. "The beginning of the film shows autumn foliage. […] The following scenes show snow – it is October, November. […] Sometimes the snow comes and goes in autumn. Sometimes the willow grouses change their appearance to white and the snow goes away – they become visible.", interviewee A describes the first scene of the dancers appearing in their ballet costumes. It shows late autumn which continues until the first lasting snow arrives. During this time, the migratory birds leave for South and the willow grouses change their feathers.[147] Thus, both the willow grouse and the dancers switch their outer appearance.

Interviewee A recounts about willow grouses: "They sleep under the snow, when it is cold in the winter. They dig a hole – in Finnish this is called *kieppi*."[148] As nordic bird the willow grouse knows to change its feathers from summer to winter and find food even in the coldest temperatures. Digging holes into the snow allows the willow grouse to hide from predators and stay warm while sleeping. It has adapted to the harsh weather conditions like the Sámi have.

The willow grouse is a traditional bird to hunt. Its hunting permissions constitute one of the conflicting topics between the Sámi and the state-owned enterprise *Metsähallitus* which manages state-owned land and water areas.[149] Interviewee A reflects critically on these regulations: "Generally speaking, everyone who wants to shoot birds needs to buy a permission from the *Metsähallitus*." Similarly to the discussion about fishing rights, interviewee A talks about the struggle of regulating the amount of birds and the distribution of the hunting rights amongst tourists and locals.

Unlike the swan, the willow grouse does not migrate. Interpreting the dancers as willow grouses means that they have a different reason for their journey. Interviewee A elucidates: "They are examining their environment on their way to the South and the two *Eatnanvuloš Lottit* [*Birds in the Earth*], the two willow grouses from under the earth, want to protest or tell something to the Finnish people." The willow grouse twins might want to discuss about their observations along the way. Although theoretically having the right to participate in decisions concerning their homeland, in many aspects the Sámi voices have been inquired after laws were already installed or agreements had been confirmed. Multiple times Sámi politicians have tried travelling to Helsinki in order to be able to speak and be heard. The willow grouses' journey might be one of these trips.

Watching *Birds of the Earth* from a Finnish cultural background, the swan seems plausible. It links with familiar symbols and supports the narration of the story in the short film. As a Sámi, the willow grouse might be a more common association. Interviewee B agrees: "The dancers are so delicate and

[147] Porsanger A n.d.
[148] "North Nature," n.d.
[149] "Metsähallitus: English," n.d.

white and they are prancing on a crust of snow. I immediately thought that they are willow grouses." Considering the contemporary mix of cultures, these two birds might also be a hybrid form, combining Sámi and Finnish connotations. Which bird a spectator sees, tells about the spectator's background and dyes further interpretations in a certain colour.

5.3. Props and scenography

The previous chapters describe how choreography leads our understanding and how costumes code the narratives we see in *Birds in the Earth*. In this chapter, attention is turned away from the protagonists and onto their surrounding environments and items.

Helander describes in an interview how many scenes derived from the film location and free association instead of a detailed script. The shooting locations were chosen carefully and often in close co-creation with the Haarla twins.[150] In many scenes, the juxtaposition of the protagonists with the scenography or with the props produce effects of humour and absurdity which is one of the main qualities of the short film. The following chapter explores how content arises from the locations and which narratives are induced by the positioned props.

5.3.1. (Im)practical items

"Sámi art, in my opinion, is very practical.", interviewee A states, "This video included." The Sámi relationship to arts and handicraft also tells us about how we can understand the objects used in *Birds in the Earth*. The props in the short film are all taken from everyday life situations. They serve a practical purpose outside of the film and a meaning-making function inside of if. There are lassos and scarves, stand-in photo props and a stuffed reindeer. The later might seem like requisites in the traditional sense: specially made for the performance and not existing elsewhere.[151] However, they are commonly displayed in touristic shops or cottages, thus are of practical use in the real world. The items used in *Birds in the Earth* are contributors to the narratives as they co-create the milieu together with the scenography.

[150] Römpötti 2019.
[151] Engell 2018, 2.

Collected consumption

Some settings are defined by only few dominant objects, others are saturated with multiple props blending into the scenography. The scene of the dancers catching items with their *suohpan* is a mixture. The retrieved items are first shown separately. We see closeups of each object: a stuffed red fox, a microwave, a blond doll's face, the head of a stuffed arctic fox in its summer coat, a dark-haired doll with red fingernails and lips, a microwave and a black toaster with a skull-and-bones image and a stuffed white willow grouse with a blurred object in the background. The setting ends with showing the accumulation of these household and decoration items.

When showing the individual props in a large-scale closeup, they seem to become subjects themselves. These kind of camera settings are usually applied to frame a living person's face. Here, the stuffed animals and the dolls are shown as living protagonists. They almost look like having a mind of their own. As neither props nor protagonists speak in *Birds in the Earth*, the muteness of the props does not attract further attention.

Interpreting the assumption of the dancers being willow grouses, interviewee A lays connections with the items. "There are two kinds of enemies for the willow grouse in Sápmi: the fox and the human." The first two items pulled into the frame by the dancers are a red fox and a microwave. "What can happen to the willow grouses in Sápmi? The fox has them as food or they will be eaten by a human." Next, we see the blond doll looking at the camera followed by the arctic fox. Maybe they are facing each other in a fight for the willow grouse. Another doll is shown and then the microwave again and a toaster. The willow grouse is the last prop in a closeup. In the short film, it has the same size and importance as the other items. They are on eye-level with each other and the spectator.

The following frame shows the accumulated items cluttered in front and around the ballerinas. Their *suohpan* hanging neatly tied from their upper bodies. It seems like the girls have all the props under control. The animals are dead and the household items and dolls are lifeless as well. The cluster is accompanied by recreational items such as a tennis rack, a skateboard and a harmonium. There is a dancing shoe and an embroided variation of the painting *Guardian Angel* by Bernhard Plockhorst. None of these items are traditionally Sámi or seem to belong in this snowy environment. Yet, these can all be part of contemporary Sámi life.

Comparing the closeups with the cluster of items the dancers end up with in this scene, raises associations in interviewee C with Sámi minimalism and honor of land. Interviewee C wonders whether "this has anything to do with the Sámi? With respecting the environment, plastic waste and all that." Interviewee C elaborates that it belongs to the Sámi culture to be fine with less. As example, interviewee C explains how reindeer are used completely when chosen for slaughter. In handicrafts,

the making of shoes from the reindeer leather leaves barely leftovers. “It is a kind of zero-waste atmosphere.”, interviewee C tells. Everything can be utilised. Interviewee C expresses the wish to wake up others to realise that we do not need that much. Instead, we should rather emphasise our relations with nature. According to interviewee C, this could help us realise that having a bond with nature means to honor nature, consume less and not waste it.

This raises the association of the nomadic lifestyle of the Fell Sámi in ancient times when only the minimal amount of useful items could be taken on the journeys. Only purposeful things were transported which meant cherishing your belongings without collecting a huge amount of them. It also connects to the saying interviewee A mentions: “Practical can be beautiful. And beauty is practical.” However, the items in the snow surrounding the dancers seem rather absurdly out of place instead of practical in this environment.

Before this scene, also interviewee B thinks of the dancers as willow grouses. Yet, when they begin to lasso the props, interviewee B changes their mind. “It became so materialistic that you kind of need humans. So maybe they are actually Sápmi.”, interviewee B concludes. Maybe the scene tells of the Sámi gathering items, interviewee B ponders. Consumer culture and technologisation have also impacted the contemporary Sámi culture. Traditionally, the Sámi have, for example, only harvested the amount that was needed for the moment. However, nowadays it is impossible to live according to these ideals of leaving the rest for the next as otherwise you yourself will be left behind like Sámi rapper Ailu Valle explains in an interview about contemporary Sámi life and culture.[152]

As the dancers are gathering the items with their *suohpan*, they seem to control the props. The scene ends as the girls push down on the keys of the harmonium. In the following scenography, all the items have vanished. Maybe this is an act of rebellion to let go of consumerist habits which have come to Sápmi. The pile of accumulated objects as a whole as well as the categories of the items do not speak to Sámi traditions. Maybe this scene is a call to remember the connection with the land. The Sámi togetherness with land is not based on collecting and owning objects. Accordingly, the discussions on landownership might be more accurately named with the Finnish term “maankäyttöoikeus” which literarily translates to the right to use the land.

The following scene shows the dancers amidst leafless birch trees as the props have vanished. The sound initiated by the dancers on the harmonium is described as an illustration of a catastrophe by interviewee A. The combination of one scene describing consumption and the following pointing to catastrophes of the autumnal moth, as elaborated earlier, addresses the topic of climate crises from multiple angles. Two thirds of the Utsjoki birch forests have already been destroyed by the spread of

[152] Himberg and Jegorow 2020 (2011); Saamelaiset säkeet 2012.

the autumnal moth and the winter moth due to mild autumns. Even small changes of the climate are having an immense impact on the sensitive arctic nature. It regenerates very slowly if at all.[153] Showing the accumulated items and subsequently the dead birch forest creates an image of cause and effect.

Image appropriation

The second scene, which employs props in a meaning-making manner, is situated at the Karhutupa which translates to bear cottage or cabin.[154] There, the dancers pass a touristic cottage with stand-in photo props and wooden sculptures of arctic animals. A sign states "SOUVENIRS & CAFÉ". The arrangement of the objects form a stage-like atmosphere instead of a natural representation of a culture. These static props could also be seen as scenographic elements. When observing the items as individual objects, they colour the scene in manifold angles of approaches and connotations.

Interviewee A elaborates that this place has a long-standing history with appropriation: "The souvenirs sold there are coming from China. And the people standing by the house and being filmed by tourists – they were not Sámi." In the 1970s and 1980s, only the Siida Sámi Museum and Nature Centre in Inari and an annual handicrafts exhibition were displaying real Sámi culture. As the dancers move through the scene, all the other elements are still. There is a stuffed reindeer on the front porch, other figures of animals made from wood as well as stand-in photo props. The lifeless props create a slightly haunting and unreal atmosphere. The dancers are alone in a world of exhibited objects. Even they are on display: We, the spectators of the short film, are watching them perform. This is emphasised by the last frame in this scenography which shows the twins next to the stand-in photo props and two white dogs. They are posing for us to take a mental picture.

The white dogs bring to our mind the arctic dogs who help with reindeer herding as well as in hunting. Reindeer dogs had to have enough self-confidence and authority in order to have the reindeer obey them. The dog was understood to be the only creature with a soul in addition to the human.[155] In this scene, the twins are holding the dogs on a tight leash. They have been taken out of their traditional context and function and are now there for the tourists to be seen.

One of the stand-in photo props is a trio of bears. The other one seems to illustrate a Sámi boy and girl with a smiling reindeer. The costumes of the human figures remind of the *gákti*, yet their details

[153] See Torvinen 2009.
[154] See "Karhunpesäkivi" n.d.
[155] Palmroth n.d.

are different to the traditional costumes. They refer poorly to the rich meaning of the *gákti*. Appropriation of the *gákti* is still today practiced and fought against. Only a few years ago, in 2016, Helander and her Sámi colleague Outi Pieski wrote an open letter in response to the malpractice of the *gákti* in an artwork acquired by the Finnish National Gallery. By purchasing the video work, so Helander and Pieski, Kiasma museum as part of the Finnish National Gallery had symbolically blessed the appropriation of Indigenous cultures. The accusation was not accepted by the museum.[156] Nonetheless, the use of the *gákti* is a symbol for the wearer's identity which has become vulnerable through the experiences of colonisation in history and culture. Ironically, the stand-in photo props have as little identity left as an appropriated *gákti*: The faces are missing. They can be replaced by anyone which undermines the function and beauty of the traditional Sámi costume.

The advertising shields at the Karhutupa are in English and therefore probably intended for international tourists. Nowadays, the ones who travel around Sápmi are not only the Sámi. There is also tourism for fun and leisure and a pinch of culture which means also commercialising Sámi culture. Interviewee C has a two-fold view on this. On the one hand, interviewee C recognises the tourists' hunger for information about the Sámi. In fact, interviewee C thinks some tourists have acquired even more basic knowledge on the Sámi than many Finnish. However, the shared information is often based on the out-dated Sámi image: herding reindeer and living in temporary housing. On the other hand, interviewee C appreciates the exposure of Sámi culture. However, it is challenging to not have tourism take over the Sámi culture but have the Sámi culture as the leading part. "In a way that the Sámi culture is defining itself, instead of being determined by the image offered to tourism and tourists.", interviewee C concludes.

5.3.2. Togetherness with homeland

The individual scenes are interlinked by the overarching journey through the landscapes of Finland from north to south and back. This route is inspected in the context of nomadism, a lifestyle the Fell Sámi used to exercise in earlier times. Furthermore, the contrasting urban environment raises the topic of *city-Sámis*. The third scenography examined more closely is the closing location of the churn where reindeer are divided and marked annually. This place of circularity and life leaves the spectator with open questions which are referred to towards the end.

[156] Frilander 2016.

Land of nomads

Nomadism and reindeer herding are two stereotypes which neither match the contemporary Sámi nor have described the Sámi of earlier times. Contrary to this assumption, not all Sámi in the past lived as nomads. “Only the ones working with reindeer and their families.”, interviewee A narrates. “But not everyone, such as fishers, artisans, hunters.” Interviewee A explains how the Sámi had all kinds of general and even specialised professions depending on what was needed in the community. Not every artisan, for example, would produce knives, interviewee A clarifies.

Associating the Sámi with nomadism comes from ancient times. First written documents referring to reindeer herding and its development among the Sámi are from 892 A.D. which means that the practice must be even older than this. The Fell Sámi had adapted a nomadic lifestyle in rhythm with the seasons due to their livelihood as large-scale reindeer herders.[157] This meant travelling according to the reindeer’s needs to find food in the harsh winters and shelter from blood-sucking insects in the summers. When crossing far distances and living in temporary housing, only the minimal amount of practical items and tools were brought along. Reindeer husbandry is still understood as the most important livelihood to keep the Sámi language and culture alive as it has lead to an extensive vocabulary on the reindeer and natural conditions.[158] Gradually the nomadic lifestyle has decreased. In the past decades, reindeer management has changed even more through modern technological advantages. Many aspects of reindeer husbandry were left behind. The modern reindeer herder makes use of equipment such as GPS-devices, snowmobiles and helicopters.[159] Up until now the Reindeer Herders’ Association reports 36% of Finland’s total area still as reindeer husbandry territory.[160]

A nomadic life demands a different kind of organisational structure of landownership than the current state of Finland acknowledges. Traveling through the areas of nowadays Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia, there were times when the Sámi were paying taxes to several states due to their nomadic living. As the borders in Northern Europe were adjusted multiple times, the traditional routes of the Sámi were simultaneously affected. Nowadays 90 percent of the Sámi homeland has become state-owned.[161] The process behind this is more than questionable and has been under investigation several times without definite resolution. Many generations have been affected by these

[157] Heikkinen n.d.
In contrast to the Fell Sámi, the Forest Sámi did not have a nomadic lifestyle. The reindeer husbandry of the Forest Sámi is closer to the Finnish reindeer herding as the herders do not travel with the reindeer throughout the year.
[158] The Reindeer Herders’ Association 2015.
[159] Mattus n.d.
[160] The Reindeer Herders’ Association 2015.
[161] Typpö 2019.

unstable conditions also lacking the protection of own national borders. The experience has been described as being made invisible. Scenes such as covering the "state-owned" sign bring back this visibility for the Sámi. Yet, culture and traditions have suffered throughout the decades.

Although the nomadic reindeer herding is mainly in the past for the Sámi, the reindeer are still accompanied during their migrations. Documenting the journey, drone photographs and films such as the ones by Jan Helmer Olsen show similar views as *Birds in the Earth.*[162] Helmer Olsen's films portray the long strings of reindeer wandering through the snow between the arctic fells. From the bird's-eye perspective, the reindeer herd looks like a giant active community, bringing to mind bees or ants, as the reindeer make their way followed by the reindeer herders in their modern snowmobiles.[163] One perspective in particular resembles scenes in Helander's short film in which two rows of footsteps are crossing snowy land amidst small birch trees. Helmer Olsen's image shows the same landscape. Yet, unlike the empty looking environment of the scenes in *Birds in the Earth*, it is filled with life and movement. A large amount of reindeer is making their way in several queues between the leafless trees.[164] In Helander's film, the equivalent scenography suggests only two being's footsteps through the same landscape. The perspective and surroundings of these scenes in *Birds in the Earth* seem to refer to the migratory journey of the reindeer. Whereas we see hundreds of reindeer in the images of Helmer Olsen, the two lines of footsteps in *Birds in the Earth* might refer to the suppression and following reduction of Sámi life and tradition. If the short film is showing us discourses of the Sámi community, maybe the absence in the scenes with the footsteps is the actual content. The almost forlorn two rows of footsteps might show us what is not there anymore. In other words, the emptiness around these two lines illustrates the decrease of reindeer and reindeer herders. The only reindeer left in the short film are stuffed ones at the Karhutupa and at the Finnish parliament house.

Regulated paths

In beginning of *Birds in the Earth*, two dancers are walking through a snow landscape. We see the traces of footsteps filmed from above, then the girls are walking past a gas station. They make their way by foot. They choose by themselves where and how to move through the land, which is seen in one of the bird's-eye view shots showing their footsteps. There is no path to follow because the snow has covered everything. No national borders are visible. Nobody is giving them directions. Even the

[162] Helmer Olsen n.d.
Jan Helmer Olsen documents contemporary Sámi life and particularly on reindeer herding through photography.
[163] Helmer Olsen 2020.
[164] Helmer Olsen 2016.

regulating board of “state-owned land” is transformed into mere “land”. There is nothing between the body that transports their weight and the nature that holds and surrounds them. The girls merge into their surroundings. They look simultaneously independent and included.

In a homeland full of nature, the girls are choosing their own paths through the snow. The traces form curved rows. Yet, as they pass the gas station, they move differently. They walk in a straight line behind each other directed by the pavement cleaned from snow. In the natural landscape, their movements are organically circling amongst the leafless birch trees. Unevennesses of the arctic fauna are forming the ground. As we watch them we feel the softness of the forest ground built up from moss, lichen and small twigs. The vegetation in the North has moulded into these shapes slowly and without human interference. In contrast to the vegetation stands the red wooden signpost “VALTION MAATA” which looks absurdly crooked between the living trees in the background.

As the girls are dancing behind each other again on an elevated path, it seems like they are walking on a built dam. They follow the strict line offered by this human made route. Crossing the concrete road, when coming up from the Tana river, the twins enter a fully human-made environment at the Karhutupa. The constructed surroundings are still from natural material even when they change from the wooden cottage to the natural stone buildings and granite parliament house in Helsinki. However, the naturally flowing lines in Sápmi and the geometrical forms in the city are juxtaposed. The available routes in the city are pre-chosen by architects and city planners. Suddenly, there are right and wrong ways to move and behave. There are rules and regulations or at least guidelines on where to go and how to get there. This becomes visible in the way the scenography of each scene allows and welcomes the dancers to advance.

For the Sámi, arctic land and nature have been the natural base for living. Home is larger than the house. Interviewee B identifies their Sámi home as encompassing also the trees and fells around their house. Sámi theologian Helga West draws attention to the term “nature” in this context. West explains that it is not a very commonly used term among the Sámi, as “nature” does not refer to any specific location nor time. Interviewee A also states that the Sámi are a practical people. According to West, in the Sámi culture your environment is always concrete. Instead of the abstract word “nature” which is neither rooted in a specific time or place, the Sámi generally refer to their surroundings more precisely.[165] For a city inhabitant, “nature” is easily associated to leisure, relaxation time and vacation. Traditionally and culturally for the Sámi, nature’s concreteness is omnipresent and integrated in everyday life in a practical manner. This relationship is practice-based and nearby.

[165] West 2019.

From the perspective of wide unregulated land without particular anthropocentric utility, the way we move nowadays seems to be imposed onto the natural landscapes. An example in the short film is shown through the gas station. As the girls walk by, a man is driving off after filling his car's tank. This shows two different means of traveling including their varying speed and connection with nature.

Birds in the Earth unveils human interference into the free nature through built environments, tourism and ownership constituting concerns among the Sámi. In Sápmi, rearrangements of natural landscapes have caused trauma in the people. Through violent reshaping of land, many have lost their homes. An example mentioned earlier has been the resettlement for building a dam.[166] "They arrive in the village centre of Utsjoki. […] It was not a noble or grand arrival, but rather anaemic or sad.", interviewee C describes further the flat straight line of the dam. According to interviewee C, these scenes with reshaped and industrialised environment in Sápmi express disrespect towards the land. After a short moment, interviewee C intensifies their words: "Maybe not only disrespect but rather [it is] raped land."

After such colonising actions across Sápmi, it comes to no surprise that questions of ownership and usage of land have turned out to be everlasting discourses between the Sámi and the Finnish state. These questions include who legally owns Sápmi and who does the land and waters actually belong to as well as who has traditional rights for these lands and waters. Helander states that these are discourses raised in *Birds in the Earth*.[167] Its filming locations are a way of addressing these issues as a surrounding experience for the Sámi dancers. They are not represented in actions or objects, which would be temporary or graspable, but in entire scenographies enclosing and contextualising the dancers' every movement.

Concrete jungle

The discourses of tourism, consumerism and built environment are also illustrated in the two scenes taking place in the city centre of Helsinki. The business street Aleksanterinkatu and the Finnish parliament house as the architectural manifestation of the government are used as symbols. The urban environment exaggerates and underlines these issues. An urban cityscape becomes strange and foreign when looking at it from the perspective of untouched arctic nature. However, the city has also become the home residency for many Sámi.

[166] Ranta and Kanninen 2019, 64–77.
[167] Torikka 2017.

Helander herself was born in Helsinki and describes her roots to lay in both Utsjoki and Helsinki.[168] Returning to the stereotype of the Sámi practicing a nomad's life, this maintenance of strong bonds to two different places, the city and the Sápmi homeland, can be described as a modern type of nomadism. Many contemporary Sámi have left their homeland to find higher education and to be able to work in their profession. Often the destinations are the cities which offer these kind of infrastructures. Accordingly, none of the three interviewees live in Sápmi anymore. Interviewee B says they would happily move back to Sápmi if it was possible to exercise their job remotely from there. Interviewee C also wishes to participate more in the culture and community and finds it hard to do so when not being physically present. Interviewee A keeps a strong connection with the home culture and community despite their frequent travel due to work.

Nowadays, more than 60 percent of the 100,000 Sámi in Finland do not live on their homeland anymore.[169] About 1,000 live in the Helsinki region. Even though some are moving back to Sápmi, for example in order to give their children the opportunity to improve in their Sámi mother language, there are more and more Sámi moving to urban environments.[170] In these cities, especially Helsinki, the urban Sámi organise themselves and form their own additional communities. An example is the *city-Sámis* association *Ry City-Sámit Rs*.[171] They describe themselves as equally multi-identical as the contemporary Sámi community and culture and their motivation is to enable the *city-Sámi* to practice their own culture and language. Additionally, they aim to make the urban Sámi feel home and to help bring together Sámi who are not from the same kin. This kind of exchange enhances mutual understanding among the multifaceted Sámi cultures and languages.

The protagonists of *Birds in the Earth* embody both Sámi and non-Sámi qualities through costumes and performance. Similarly, most Sámi contemporaries in Finland are balancing between Sámi and Finnish influences and conventions. Interviewee B notices references to the *city-Sámi* in the scene of the girls in *gákti* dancing in front of the parliament house. "They are not really traditional.", interviewee B wonders if the free improvised movements are the way a *city-Sámi* would dance in a disco. Although living in the Helsinki metropolitan area, interviewee B does not see themselves as *city-Sámi*. Interviewee B explains that they have a certain idea of what a *city-Sámi* and a Sámi from the North is like. Having lived in both places, interviewee B asks if this might be the way those Sámi,

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[168] Helander n.d.
[169] "The Sámi in Finland" n.d.
[170] "Ry City-Sámit Rs: Yhdistys" 2010.
[171] "Ry City-Sámit Rs: Keitä ovat citysaamelaiset?" n.d.
The *Ry City-Sámit Rs* was founded by Sámi activists. On their website, they describe three types of association members: the educated super-Sámi activists who have lived in and outside of Sápmi, the ones who grew more active only after moving away from Sápmi and the 'actual' city-Sámi who were born and raised in the Helsinki metropolitan area with Sámi connections only to their own kin before joining the association.

who have never lived outside of Sápmi, see the ones who have moved or who were born outside of Sápmi.

Interviewee C views this scene as a fight in the concrete jungle although the parliament is not made of concrete but of natural stone. “Yearning for nature among the stones.”, interviewee C titles this scene. This ties together with interviewee A’s feeling of the parliament house’s coldness and the disorientation that interviewee B experiences in the city centre of Helsinki. The girls dancing freely in their colourful *gákti* brings more roundness and warmth into the straight lines of the scenography in front of the parliament house. In comparison with the ballet movements, which are performed side by side, the free flowing movements intertwine. The two girls are interacting vividly in front of this otherwise motionless scenography. Their movements are rather resembling the birds in the air than, for example, the slowly directed route of the tram or the casual walking of the people on Aleksanterinkatu.

Birds in the Earth shows us the contemporary nomads, the *city-Sámi*. Not only are the twins portraying the migration of birds, as discussed earlier. They also tell us how the number of Sámi moving to the cities is growing. One additional narrative layer is thus contemporary nomadism which leaves many Sámi migrating between the city and their homeland.

Closing locations

The last scenes of *Birds in the Earth* in the urban environment show the Finnish parliament’s stairs. Although the short film does not end in this location, the narrative seems to find an accumulative ending in front of the Finnish parliament house. The sound has become apocalyptic and the sun is casting a long shadow onto the stairs as in the late afternoon. The ballerinas are kneeling down to rest their head on the ground. The sun has set and the sound has faded out. All that remains in front of the parliament house is the stuffed reindeer in a cloudy environment. The Finnish parliament house is still standing and standing still.

Choosing the parliament’s stairs as filming location frames the narratives in the context of protest. It seems as if the twins have gone on their journey in order to manifest their experiences and opinions on the Sámi discourses publicly. Interviewee A views this scene specifically as the willow grouses from the North manifesting their opinion in a protest. The parliament stairs are commonly used as location for all kinds of demonstrations. The dancers in their *gákti* on the parliament stairs remind of an image of the Sámi activist Petra Laiti in her *gákti* in the context of a climate demonstration.[172] Although the

[172] Rantanen 2019.

short film does not end here, it seems like this location is where the previous scenes result in. The confrontative juxtaposition of the dancers and the parliament house describe a direct communication between the Sámi and the Finnish state. However, the parliament house's doors stay closed and the two Sámi dancers leave. Maybe they left the stuffed reindeer as reminder to the Finnish state that the issues are not resolved yet. Both the Finnish parliament house and the stuffed reindeer stay next to each other without interaction. Interviewee B experiences these open-ended discussions as exhausting: "Most of the Sámi want things to be resolved instead of leaving them so spiralling endlessly."

The ending scene of *Birds in the Earth* shows the dancers back in Sápmi in the middle of a round-up corral which is called a churn or in North Sámi *girdnu*. They are spinning and flapping their wings as they did in front of the parliament house. It seems they have returned to their homeland. "Maybe these things, the political issues, will never be solved but it will be an everlasting limbo.", interviewee B describes the endless spinning movement.

The ending of the film leaves the spectators, and maybe also the makers, with questions instead of answers. The interviewees have several different references for the continuous turning in the *girdnu*. Interviewee A speculates if the Sámi dancers have gone to Sámi heaven represented by the churn. "It is often considered as the center of life.", interviewee A elaborates. Annually the churns are used for separating the reindeer. Those without earmarks are identified and marked and some reindeer are chosen for slaughter. It is both a practical and a social event for the communities with a long tradition.[173] In Alta in Norway, there is a 5,000–6,000-year-old wall painting depicting a pen, which is a part of the round-up corral, for catching wild reindeer.[174] Interviewee C wonders how to interpret the churn associations. On the one hand, it is everything but comforting to see a churn this empty. This could refer to the decrease of both the numbers of reindeer and reindeer herders as well as the strategic diminishment of Sámi culture in general. On the other hand, interviewee C believes that this churn actually is still in use. Interviewee C explains that they always see the image of the sun, the life-giver, in the *girdnu*. "When picturing it from above, they are always kind of sun-like. And there the swans are dancing their mating dance.", interviewee C's thoughts wander into associations. Yet, both interviewee A and C connect the churn with receiving life and being alive which is a more optimistic understanding than the melancholic *joik* background evokes.

Another interpretation that comes to interviewee A's mind is the old Sámi drum, in North Sámi *goavddis*, and the figures on the drum's skin called *govadas*. "It is actually a beautiful figure.", interviewee A describes the last scene in which the camera is turning and the image fades to black as

[173] The Reindeer Herders' Association 2015.
[174] Heikkinen n.d.

the girls are spinning in the churn. We see the pens of the round-up corral spreading out from the churn in the centre. Before christianity, the *goavddis* was used by both the *noaidi* and regular people to foresee the future. Professor of Sámi culture Veli-Pekka Lehtola describes the *govadas*, the figures on a Sámi drum, as reflection of the human world or rather as a cognitive map of the human mind.[175] Although *Birds in the Earth* is not directly visualising future images, there are similarities with the way that both the short film and the *govadas* reflect processes of the Sámi's, specifically Helander's, mind and experience.

Researching further into Sámi mythology, the idea of man-like creatures called *gufihttar* in North Sámi that live in subterranean dwellings present another fruitful comparison. Living in a parallel underworld to the human world, the *gufihttar* mirror the humans' values and apprehensions of, for example, how one should behave in the world.[176] Sámi artist Britta Marakatt-Labba includes this relation of humans and *gufihttar* into her artwork. In her broidery named *Konferens*, both worlds are visible in one image.[177] In a lecture on her work, Marakatt-Labba explains how the underground is scared about what has been happening on the other side, on top of the earth. Helander's protagonists can also be understood as *gufihttar*, as they do not have any contact with other living beings throughout the film. If translating the Sámi title of the short film *Eatnanvuloš Lottit* literally, *vulos* means "downwards, to down below, to downstairs (towards)".[178] In addition to the reference to the willow grouses, the birds down below under the snow, maybe the whole world seen throughout the short film is down below. Maybe it is the mirrored world of the *gufihttar* reminding of the values of the human world.

Whichever interpretation is seen in *Birds in the Earth*, the ending is left open. The Sámi dancers have returned to the North into the center of one of their traditional environments. The camera fades the image to black and the spectators are left with unresolved thoughts, feelings and questions. It seems like an ambivalent and yet fair conclusion to discourses which are far from being finished.

[175] Veli-Pekka Lehtola's e-mail to author 19.3.2020.
[176] Veli-Pekka Lehtola's e-mail to author 19.3.2020.
[177] See Marakatt-Labba 1990.
[178] "Vulos in English," n.d.

6. Repositioning conclusions

Writing a polyphonic interpretation with the intention of decentralising the narratives meant being in conversation with others as well as with myself. Questions about the responsibility of an art historian and researcher were accompanying me throughout the process of researching and writing. In addition to the short film, the research concerned my role as an art historian. Everyone should be allowed to write about anything, yet, the right to do so is joined by the responsibility of reflecting and re-evaluating your own position. This can first seem intimidating. As a non-Sámi, I remain an outsider of the culture. First, I perceived this as disadvantage as I could not understand connotations on an experiential and intuitive level. However, the outside perspective brings fresh points of view when being brave enough to educate yourself thoroughly from various types of sources. Especially when interpreting a decolonising artwork such as Helander's short film, an art historian cannot claim to remain apolitical themselves. Through research and writing, the author formulates their own position at least indirectly and between the lines. The stance I have taken in this thesis by choosing a methodology which includes others' voices and experiences and by phrasing the interpretations in a multi-stringed way reveals the ambition to bring together and facilitate conversations with others and within myself.

6.1. Decentralised reflections

Birds in the Earth shows a decolonising Sámi self-portrait which stays autonomous from the colonial gaze. It succeeds to escape exoticism. It does not need to explain itself to outsiders in order to be accessible. It speaks to both the Sámi and those who are still to become aware of the Sámi discourses. At the same time, it is a gentle and humorous invitation to educate yourself and decentralise your knowledge on Sápmi and Sámi culture, history and identity. Matching this short film with the methodology functions because Helander's work examines current discourses in which Sámi contemporaries are involved. *Birds in the Earth* gives an entrance point for sharing experiences and thoughts on historical and recent matters of the Sámi community. The scenes invite to ponder with. There are no answers given and even the questions and issues raised balance between abstract and concrete in a way which allows them to be topics of open conversations.

Whereas Sámi art can make Sámi discourses approachable, a similar role can be taken by non-Sámi art historians. As a bridge and mediator between the artwork and the spectator, the art historian can contribute to the accessibility of Sámi discourses. With art historian supporting a broader awareness in the art world of these matters, the exchange is enriched and facilitated in both directions. On one

side, spectators become more familiar to the Sámi history, culture and current matters. On the other side, Sámi artists and the content of their artwork find more understanding and welcome from non-Sámi art professionals.

In the beginning of this journey, I asked which kind of interpretation a non-Sámi art historian can form about an artwork thematising the Sámi culture, history and current situation through research from literature, seminars and documentaries. In this thesis, traditional art historical methods are utilised for formulating narrative possibilities and for elaborating on interpretations phrased by the interviewees. Leaving out the open-ended interviews about the understanding of *Birds in the Earth* by the three Sámi interviewees would have enhanced the distance between the interpretation and the artwork. An interpretation formed by a non-Sámi art historian about an artwork thematising Sámi discourses by employing only traditional art historical methods means looking at the artwork and speaking about the artwork. Constructing interpretations with sources filtered and formulated by others creates and leaves a gap between the researcher and the artwork. There is the danger of pointing towards the distant artwork from the perspective of the speaking subject. The art historian might seem absent from their own text.

Including perspectives of Sámi interviewees enriches the interpretations with an additional experiential input. The short film gives insight to the experiences of the Sámi artist. In turn, an art historical interpretation tells about experiencing *Birds in the Earth*. A polyphonic interpretation gives space to voices of experiences by three Sámi. It comes alive through the addition of small stories and anecdotes shared by the interviewee. When thematising colonised culture, history and current situations such as the Sámis', I believe an art historian has to get closer to the matter than what is possible through indirect sources. The discourses are alive and open. Whereas publications and presentations can give insight about background and past events, more recent experiences can be reached through direct conversations with contemporaries.

The art historian becomes a spokesperson who combines their own researched understandings and input with lived associations. The decentralisation happens through bringing a set of voices into a single text-space of conversation and reflection. The art historian actively takes part in this conversation without dominating and without submitting. A decentralised and therefore decentralising interpretation can come closer to the substance of the artwork when formulating while self-reflecting. The acknowledgement of my discipline's historical and cultural references and origin are part of this reflective process. This methodology prevents distance and absence from your own

writing. Artist Trinh T. Minh-ha calls this “speaking nearby”: Simultaneously formulating of and reflecting on the produced words comes closer to the subject without claiming it.[179]

The methodology of adding interviews aimed at widening the range of voices. The interviewees are not a representation of all Sámi. Although I conducted only three interviews, my conversation partners exemplify the rich variations inherent to the Sámi contemporaries. One varying aspect was the assertiveness about their own Sámi identity. I experienced one interviewee with a high confidence in their Sáminess who answered questions with determination and strong historical knowledge. Another interviewee had a conciliatory stance about the Sámi discourses. Comprehending different points of views was not in contradiction with being open and comfortable with their Sáminess. Yet, one interviewee embodied how hesitant and careful you can become about speaking for the Sámi when the contact with the own Sámi community is weakened. The confidence in their own Sámi identity showed during the interview in the strictness of how the three interviewees formulated their standpoints and experiences. For the interpretations, this heterogenous spectrum of interviewees diversifies what already was a polyphony. This enriches the discussions and concedes openness instead of absolute answers to questions which are more complex than dichotomous.

Interviewing Sámi spectators not only colours in the comprehension and interpretation of *Birds in the Earth*. Understanding inter/viewing as an act of exchanging gazes, this speaking beyond addresses both interviewee and interviewer. Whereas the interpretation is made richer and its pathways obtain more diversifying branches, the art historian’s comprehension is educated in general. Through exchanging gazes, the art historian is no longer anonymous in this specific discourse. After gaining knowledge on this new land, the art historian cannot escape from re-evaluating their position on other topics as well.

In my struggle to find this new position, the writings about decolonisation through Indigenous art and polyphonic research were guiding lines and partners in leading my path. Knopf writes about Indigenous people in North America. However, parallels, such as how Indigenous artists take over the images produced of their culture, contextualise the short film by Helander into a global art method and tool of decolonisation. The intercontinental scope of Indigenous artists taking hold of space and gaze through their artistic productions implies a similar need for art historians to develop their methods and tools to write and talk about decolonising art.

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[179] Chen 1992, 87.
Trinh T. Minh-ha: “In other words, a speaking that does not objectify, does not point to an object as if it is distant from the speaking subject or absent from the speaking place. A speaking that reflects on itself and can come very close to a subject without, however, seizing or claiming it.”

Starting out with the hypothesis of Sámi discourses hidden and interwoven into *Birds in the Earth* helped to identify necessary research questions and develop a suitable methodology. Combining traditional art historical methods with the material of the interviews allowed the text to reach both the objective and subjective tails of the scale. In some aspects, the interviewee's stories were elaborated with literary research sources. This contextualises the personal anecdotes into a network of experiences in the history and culture of the Sámi. An example is the yearning for nature amidst the urban environment of Helsinki which interviewees described and how it can be recognised in the communities of the city-Sámi. In other parts, input from research plays the leading role and is nuanced by the interviewees' experiences. Describing the framing of the accumulated props in the snow as subjects receives a more detailed narrative when connecting with interviewee A's thought about the enemies of a willow grouse.

The two types of sources carry the narratives together. For example, there is no need to determine whether the dancers are to be understood as swans or willow grouses throughout the interpretation as the variety only enriches the experience of the short film. The narrative possibilities are not competing to be right. Neither prevails. They may coexist and complement each other.

Concluding, the methodology employed in this thesis proves to be purposive for decentralising narratives in *Birds in the Earth*. It facilitated a reflected repositioning of the non-Sámi art historian's role in relation to Sámi discourses. The combined methodology of open-ended interviews and art historical research through literary sources, seminars and documentaries was applicable to ensure depth and liveliness of the interpretations. It enabled speaking nearby the short film itself as well as its matters concerning the Sámi history, culture and current discourses.

6.2. Open journeys

Contextualising the example of Helander's short film in the broader field of Indigenous art raises the question of how other Indigenous people than the Sámi would connect to *Birds in the Earth.* Writings on Indigenous image-making often merge distinct Indigenous people's art by common features in order to create awareness about larger issues than what might otherwise seem like discourses of smaller communities. The question remains which narratives other Indigenous spectators might see in a short film with a different cultural yet shared colonial history.

In the Nordic countries including Finland, Sámi art builds an increasing part of the mainstream art world with more and more Sámi art in museums and internationally curated exhibitions. The growing intention of including Sámi art into art history and the field of contemporary art becomes visible in

the first retrospective of Sámi artist Nils-Aslak Valkeapää / Áillohaš. He is best-known as an innovator and reviver of *joik* and Sámi pioneer in artistic disciplines such as visual arts and poetry.[180] The Norwegian Henie Onstad art centre exhibits a large arrangement of Áillohaš' art which the curators gathered through connecting with Sámi contemporaries.[181]

Another striking example comes with the announcement about the 59th Venice Biennale in 2022: For the first time, the Nordic pavilion will be transformed into the Sámi pavilion by Sámi artists Pauliina Feodoroff, Máret Ánne Sara and Anders Sunna.[182] It will be a premiere that the Nordic pavilion will show exclusively Sámi art. Renaming the exhibition space to be the Sámi pavilion emphasises its representation of the Sámi as a people. In this way, the producing Office for Contemporary Art Norway strives for increasing awareness and knowledge of the Sámi.[183]

With a growing importance of and interest in Indigenous art, writing about contemporary art does not leave behind nor exclude the work of non-Indigenous art historians in thinking, writing and lecturing about Indigenous artists, artworks and their topics. Indigenous art includes, addresses or even emphasises decolonisation which demands sensitivity from the corresponding art historian as well. The methodology of this thesis exemplifies one way of researching and writing about Sámi art. However, the evolving variety of Indigenous artworks and artists calls for a kindred creativity and development on the side of the art historians. More ways of jointly decentralising research, knowledge and produced writings and lectures need to be designed. Acknowledging the need for togetherness in this development conveys the art historian's active part in the decolonising processes of Indigenous art.

[180] "Nils-Aslak Valkeapää / Áillohaš: Retrospective" 2020.
[181] Frilander 2020.
[182] "59th Venice Biennale 2022: Pavilions - Preliminary List" n.d.
[183] Satokangas 2020.

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Appendices

Interview Structure

Background information:
- How would you describe your Sámi identity? What does it mean to you to be Sámi?
- What is your connection to Sápmi?
- What is your connection to Helsinki?
- Where did you grow up?
- Do you speak a Sámi language?
- Where do you live now?

Introduction questions to *Birds in the Earth*:
- Have you seen the short film before?
- What do you think the short film is about?
- Which topics come to mind after watching the short film?

General questions about experiencing the short film:
- What are associations, memories, stories, references arising from the short film? How did you experience them?
- Were there associations, memories, stories, references that touched you?
- How did you feel during the short film?

Sáminess in *Birds in the Earth*:
- What is Sámi about the short film? How is Sáminess brought forward through the short film?
- Coming from the hypothesis that we understand our surroundings intuitively and automatically according to our previous experience and background, are there aspects or associations in this short film which you as a Sámi think that a Finnish person or another non-Sámi does not notice or understand?

Specific scenes and aspects:
- How do you experience and understand the juxtaposition of the ballet costume and the Sámi traditional costume?
- What do the accumulated items caught by the lassos in the snow represent to you?
- How do you interpret the scene of wild dance in *gákti* in front of the Finnish parliament house?
- What do you think it means that the dancers keep spinning in the ending of the short film? What does the ending mean to you?
- Who or what are the birds in the earth? What does the title Birds in the Earth mean to you?

Concluding questions:
- Are there other scenes which are meaningful to you and if so which ones and how?
- Is there anything else you would want to point out?
- Do you think, there is an overall narrative in the short film and if so what does it mean to you?

Figures

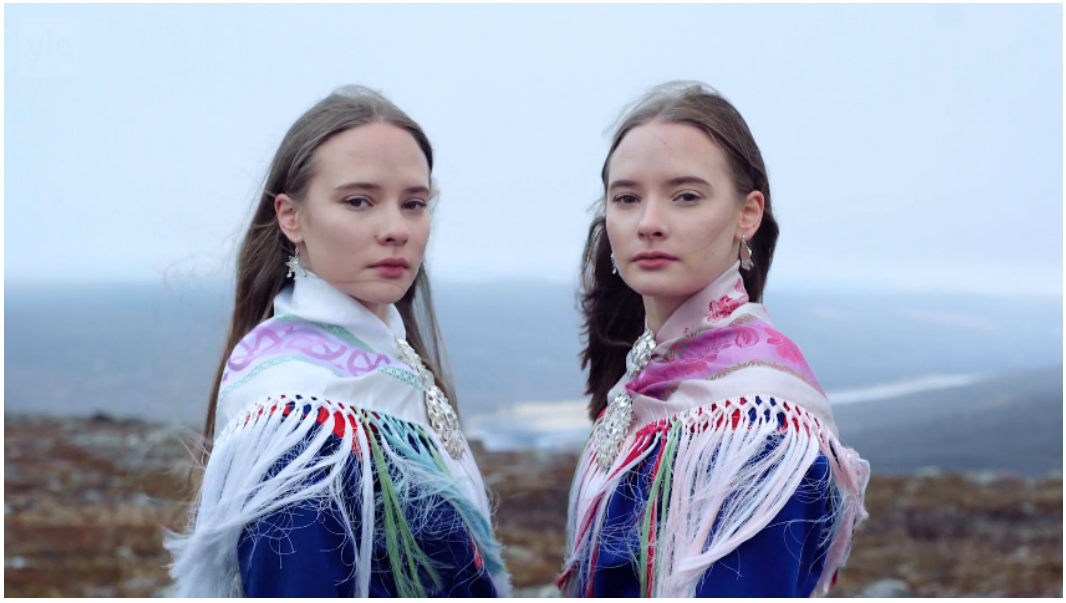

Figure 1.
Marja Helander, *Birds in the Earth*, 2018
short film
Image: Screenshot at 0:30 by author
Courtesy of the artist
See Helander 2018.

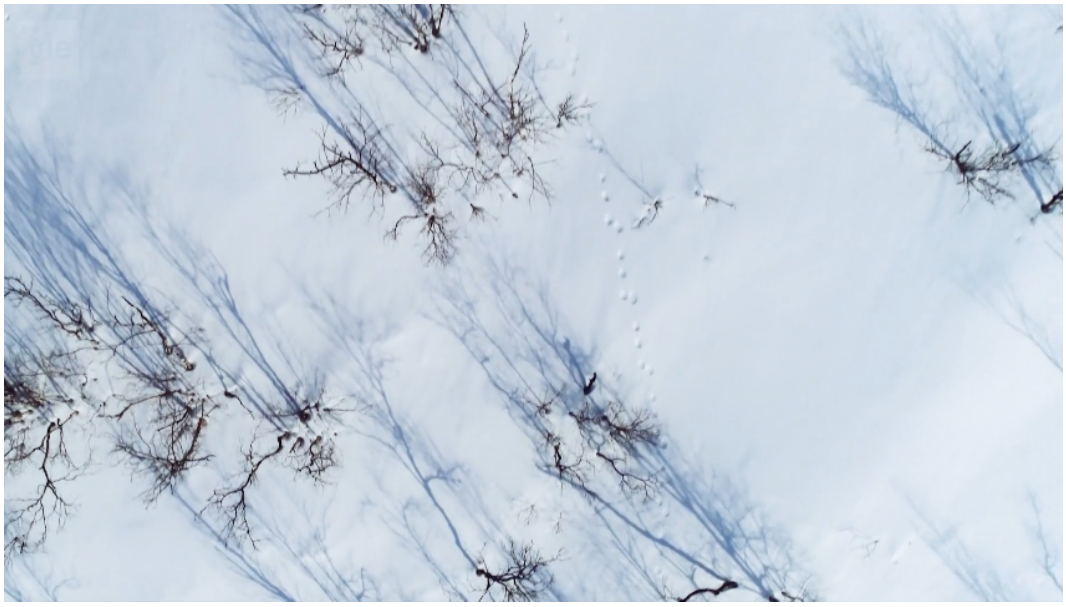

Figure 2.
Marja Helander, *Birds in the Earth*, 2018
short film
Image: Screenshot at 2:20 by author
Courtesy of the artist
See Helander 2018.

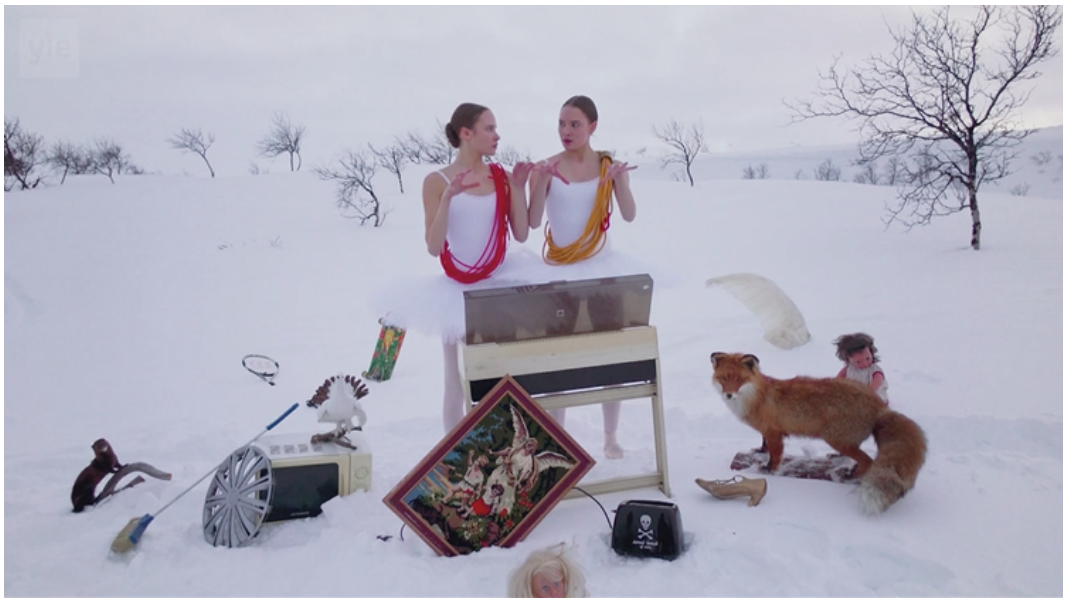

Figure 3.
Marja Helander, *Birds in the Earth*, 2018
short film
Image: Screenshot at 3:22 by author
Courtesy of the artist
See Helander 2018.

Figure 4.
Marja Helander, *Birds in the Earth*, 2018
short film
Image: Screenshot at 4:37 by author
Courtesy of the artist
See Helander 2018.

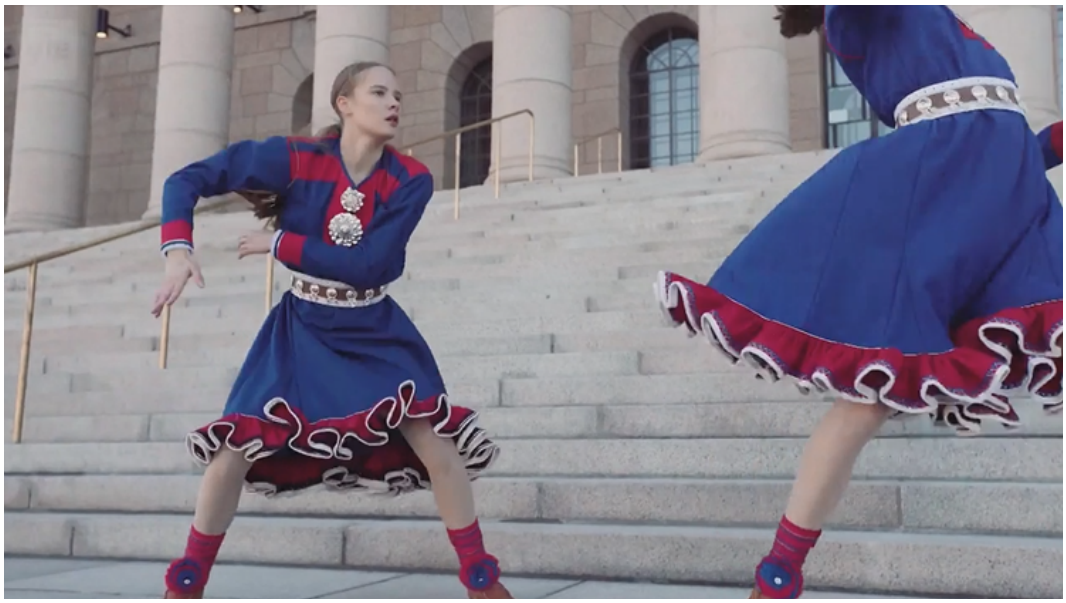

Figure 5.
Marja Helander, *Birds in the Earth*, 2018
short film
Image: Screenshot at 7:47 by author
Courtesy of the artist
See Helander 2018.

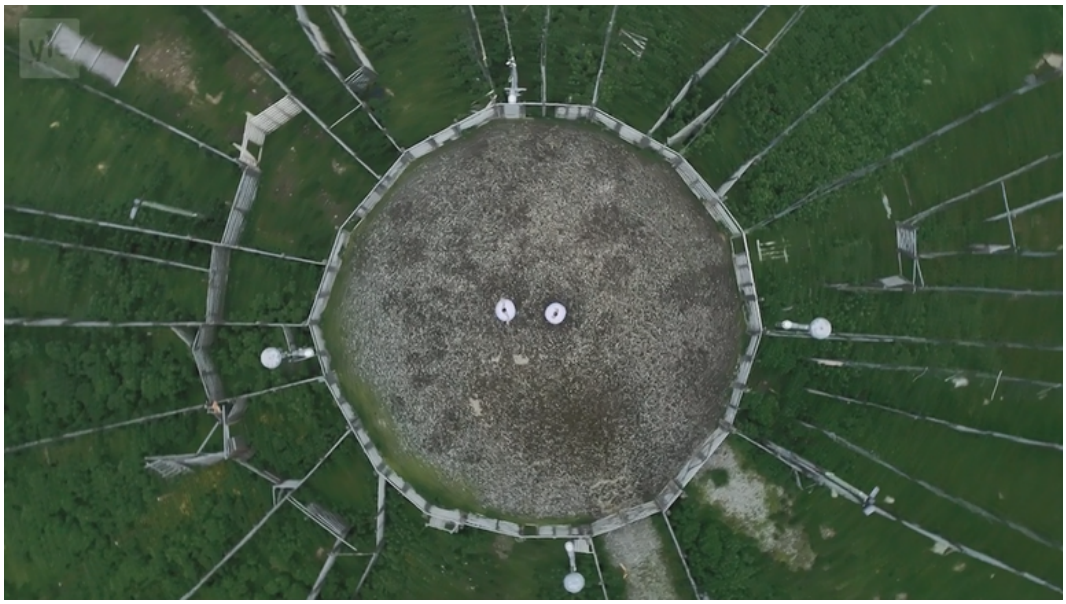

Figure 6.
Marja Helander, *Birds in the Earth*, 2018
short film
Image: Screenshot at 9:32 by author
Courtesy of the artist
See Helander 2018.

Figure 7.
Marja Helander, *Birds in the Earth*, 2018
short film
Image: Screenshot at 8:16 by author
Courtesy of the artist
See Helander 2018.

Figure 8.
Teatro Degli Arcimboldi, *Swan Lake,* 2004
film
Image: Screenshot at 42:37 by author
See Teatro Degli Arcimboldi 2004.

Figure 9.
Marja Helander, *Birds in the Earth*, 2018
short film
Image: Screenshot at 9:08 by author
Courtesy of the artist
See Helander 2018.

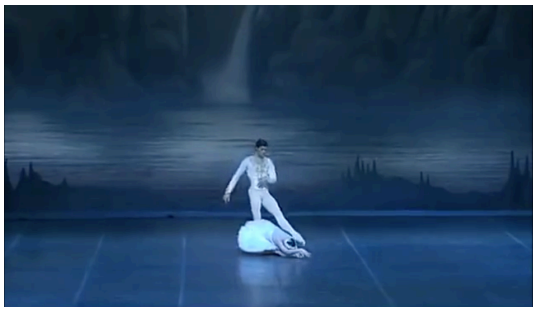

Figure 10.
Teatro Degli Arcimboldi, *Swan Lake,* 2004
film
Image: Screenshot at 54:08 by author
See Teatro Degli Arcimboldi 2004.

Figure 11.
Teatro Degli Arcimboldi, *Swan Lake,* 2004
film
Image: Screenshot at 1:53:27 by author
See Teatro Degli Arcimboldi 2004.

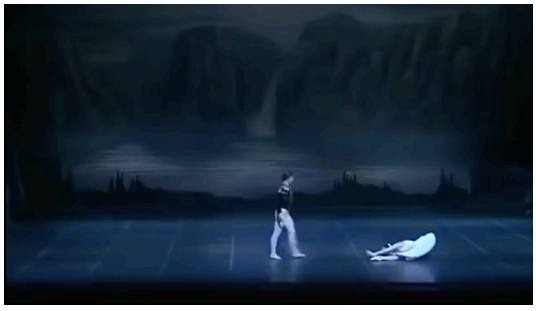

Figure 12.
Teatro Degli Arcimboldi, *Swan Lake,* 2004
film
Image: Screenshot at 2:01:51 by author
See Teatro Degli Arcimboldi 2004.

Figure 13.
Svetlana Zakharova, *The Dying Swan,* 2010
film
Image: Screenshot at 2:54 by author
See The Dying Swan 2010.

Figure 14.
Anna Pavlova, *The Dying Swan,* 2010
film
Image: Screenshot at 1:50 by author
See Anna Pavlova as The Swan 2016.

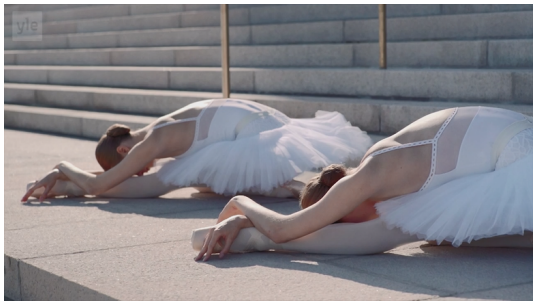

Figure 15.
Marja Helander, *Birds in the Earth*, 2018
short film
Image: Screenshot at 8:53 by author
Courtesy of the artist
See Helander 2018.

Figure 16.
Marja Helander, *Birds in the Earth*, 2018
short film
Image: Screenshot at 3:42 by author
Courtesy of the artist
See Helander 2018.

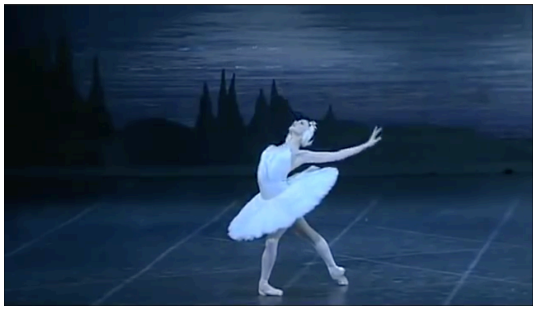

Figure 17.
Teatro Degli Arcimboldi, *Swan Lake,* 2004
film
Image: Screenshot at 42:13 by author
See Teatro Degli Arcimboldi 2004.

Figure 18.
Marja Helander, *Birds in the Earth*, 2018
short film
Image: Screenshot at 7:28 by author
Courtesy of the artist
See Helander 2018.

Figure 19.
Marja Helander, *Birds in the Earth*, 2018
short film
Image: Screenshot at 8:34 by author
Courtesy of the artist
See Helander 2018.

Figure 20.
Marja Helander, *Birds in the Earth*, 2018
short film
Image: Screenshot at 8:38 by author
Courtesy of the artist
See Helander 2018.

Figure 21.
Marja Helander, *Birds in the Earth*, 2018
short film
Image: Screenshot at 0:50 by author
Courtesy of the artist
See Helander 2018.

Figure 22.
Teatro Degli Arcimboldi, *Swan Lake,* 2004
film
Image: Screenshot at 43:14 by author
See Teatro Degli Arcimboldi 2004.

Figure 23.
Marja Helander, *Birds in the Earth*, 2018
short film
Image: Screenshot at 8:44 by author
Courtesy of the artist
See Helander 2018.